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MATTHEW DALE.

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DURING THE BEST YEARS OF MY LIFE,
HAS FOSTERED AUGHT OF GOOD THAT WAS IN ME,
This Volume
IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED.



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BOOK I.





MATTHEW DALE, FARMER.

CHAPTER I.

MAIDEN'S DREAMS.



N what apparently slender chances hang the threads of fate! In what an airy loom is spun the web of destiny! But for so slight a thing as a newspaper advertisement, this story might probably never have been written.

And this was how it ran:—

‘**HOUSEKEEPER.**—Wanted immediately a middle-aged person to take full charge of a (widower) farmer’s house. Cook and housemaid kept. No one need apply unless well acquainted with farm-house management.

‘Apply by letter to M. D., Post-office, Dunsford.’

I was living at the time with the old woman who had been first nurse, then maid-of-all-work, in my

father's modest household ; for so low had my fortunes sunk just then, that good old Janet's home was almost my only shelter. And on that particular evening I remember, as if it had been yesterday, how, all through the day, the rain and the mist alternately had dimmed the little window of Janet's parlour with a persistency of downcome and a thoroughness of effect that was not only seen but felt,—in the chilly, damp discomfort of all material surroundings—in the mental limpness that could not penetrate the gloom—in the spiritless graspings at a bypast experience of the bow in the cloud, sign and token to despairing man that He who created him will not always strive with him ; that after the storm comes the calm—after the tempestuous buffettings, the haven of peace—after the wilderness, the land of promise—after life's fitful fever, the 'rest that remaineth.'

I heard our neighbour, the cooper, come into the kitchen with the weekly newspaper, in which Janet and he went shares ; and rushing 'ben,' I eagerly secured the treasure,—leaving old Peter to give Nurse the news. Hurrying back to my sanctuary, I threw myself down on the nearest chair, little dreaming that I held my fate in my hands ; and that, through the chiaro-oscuro of that pouring night, an unforeseen vista was opening up before me, the silver streaks of an undreamt-of dawn were already rising on a life that had hitherto been more bountiful of shade than sunshine—a life of privation and anxiety, which was culminating, at that very hour,

in the darkness of a future full of uncertainty and almost destitute of hope !

My father had died two years before,—died as became a minister of the 'Relief body,' in the full odour of poverty,—leaving his twice-orphaned children all but penniless, and myself (the only daughter) too ill-educated as to what are called accomplishments to be able to relieve my necessities by any work short of menial ; and at that my friend and adviser Janet had never even hinted as among the possibilities to which I might be driven.

The boys, as she and I still called my three brothers, though fairly self-supporting, were as yet unable to make a home for themselves or me ; and meanwhile, my share of the pittance accruing from the sale of my poor father's effects, though husbanded with the utmost care, was melting away under the obvious necessity of daily bread ; and the 'filthy lucre,' from which my father was supposed to hold himself aloof, seemed as if about to revenge the outrageous affectation on his child, by literally taking wings and flying away.

Matters were indeed looking desperate ; and yet, strange to say, when I read the advertisement, it was not of myself and my failing fortunes I first thought, but of him who thus publicly proclaimed his need and the urgency with which he demanded its supply.

'That must be Matthew Dale,' I mentally observed, re-reading the paragraph backwards, the better to study its separate clauses. 'Wanted

immediately — ‘a widower.’ Yes, it must be the same. I had seen a notice of Mrs. Dale’s death, about a year before, in this very *Blackadder Chronicle*, as indeed, I am free to confess, I never missed the slightest newspaper or other notice connected with the name of Matthew Dale. ‘Cook and housemaid kept.’ Farmhouse style that, truly; but like what I knew of him, or rather what I had heard of him—for, as to knowing him, we had not even a bowing acquaintance, and, for ought I could tell, he was probably ignorant of my very existence.

And yet he had been my hero, youth and man, as he rode every week past my father’s door to the market-town of Dunsford, first on a grey pony, whose flowing mane and tail seemed to my young mind to be the most beautiful of all created things—exchanged after his father’s death for a strong black hunter that I knew carried him well across country, at the tail of the pack, when he chose to go out with the Dunsfordshire hounds; which, as he cared more for farming than hunting, he did not often do.

My father knew him slightly, and sometimes mentioned him by name as a farmer of the better class, referring, I supposed, to the circle in which he moved. I do not believe he knew enough of him to judge him by any other standard; for he was no object of interest to the kind, shy old man, whom poverty and natural diffidence first made, and then kept, humble to a painful degree.

Partly from this shyness of my only remaining parent—my mother having died in giving birth to my youngest brother—and partly from our straitened circumstances, my life was singularly destitute of the social pleasures that are usually so attractive to a young girl's fancy. So I made a delight to myself of this fleeting shadow—for it was hardly more—of Mr. Dale and his black horse; and out of the depths of a lively imagination, with which nature, always mindful of compensation, had endowed me, I filled up many a glowing picture, whose central figure never altered,—stippling in the shadows here and there, throwing up a bank of fleecy clouds against an azure sky, or stretching away, on a limitless canvas, hill and dale, tangled brake and mountain tarn, forest glade and silvery stream, whose delicious windings, back into the Unknown, might well have carried the mind to the things that eye hath not seen: but ever in the foreground stood the man and the black horse!

It was not what is ordinarily called love that I felt for my hero. It was worship rather,—a feeling that, I imagine, can only be successfully cherished towards a fellow-mortal so long as 'distance lends enchantment to the view,' by veiling the imperfections a closer scrutiny would reveal. For Matthew Dale, one of the best of men, is not now worshipped, only greatly respected and beloved in that domestic system of which he is the sun and centre.

So on that wet evening, when I re-read the advertisement, I felt assured that Mr. Dale had

risen again on the then dark and cloudy horizon of my life ; and my heart rose to the summons, and testified, by its quickened throbings, to the welcome excitement this brief paragraph occasioned. Already the paper had dropped from my hand, and Janet found me a few minutes later pacing the floor of the little chamber, partly to give vent to my feelings, and not less that I might the better arrange a suitable reply to Mr. Dale's advertisement. For this seemed the very career for which I was suited, —fast nearing, as I was, the period of middle life, but with all my youthful vigour still fresh upon me ; too ill educated even to pretend to teach, and too full of absurd notions about the disgrace of menial work even to dream of engaging in it,—though I must do myself the justice to say that these ideas were chiefly of Janet's originating and instilling ; for, being one of the noble toilers herself, of course she would be the last to discover the true dignity of labour, or find out unaided—

‘That they who sweep a room to God,
 Make that and th’ action fine.’

Though, as I have already said, I had not received what could be called a liberal education, I could use my pen well enough. Along with my three brothers, I had been thoroughly grounded in the ‘three R’s’ at the parish school,—before school boards had supplanted the grand old parochial system,—when year by year painstaking dominies, unfettered by codes and standards and demoralizing premiums on what must often be superficial

knowledge, turned out of their hands young 'village Hampdens,' who lived to bare their dauntless breasts to the tyrants who withstood them ; and wayside Miltons, neither mute nor inglorious, who all dated back their world-wide fame to their early training at the parish school.

Looking back now, I remember how I rebelled at the time at the book-keeping and more advanced branches of arithmetic, etc.,—so useless for a girl, as I considered, but for which my worthy old teacher had discovered in me a certain aptitude, and insisted on its cultivation. What if it were going to be turned to some use after all ! For already, in imagination, I was installed as house-keeper to Mr. Dale—and the letter seeking the office not so much as begun !

'Look here, Nurse,' I said, as Janet, having at last got rid of her visitor, came, as her custom was, to listen to what scraps of local gossip I chose to read to her. 'Here is an advertisement for a house-keeper. What if I try for the place ?' Not even to Janet would I give a hint of my conjecture, that was hidden away down in the innermost recesses of my heart, not to be rashly spoken of to living soul.

'A housekeeper, Miss Annie !' replied Janet. 'It's mair like me nor you, I wad say. A bonnie housekeeper I doubt ye wad mak' ; and you can neither draw the milk fra a coo, nor yet pit out a decent farle o' ait-bread !'¹

These were two accomplishments I had always

¹ Cake of oatmeal.

steadily declined to acquire, and Janet could never resist an opportunity of ringing the changes on my perversity.

‘But there are servants for all that kind of work, Nurse. Look here,’—and I pointed out the advertisement,—‘cook and housemaid kept. He’s a widower, do you see? I suppose it’s just to take the place of the dead wife,’ I added flippantly.

Janet looked at me keenly. ‘The place o’ the dead wife, quo’ she?’ echoing my thoughtless words. ‘My bonnie bairn, it’s ill talking o’ filling the place o’ the deid! I wad like weel eneuch to see ye wed, but I houp ye’re no’ gaun tae mak’ this a means tae an en’.

‘Tuts, Janet!’ I said impatiently; ‘you know me better than that. The only end I am looking to at present is to fall on some means of earning my bread.’ And while Janet, with spectacles on nose, was eagerly studying the advertisement, I penned a short reply:—

‘Ann Forbes of Blackadder would be glad to wait on M. D., with a view to the office of house-keeper, as advertised for. *N.B.*—A good knowledge of farmhouse work.’

This was true enough. All my spare time had been spent in the farmhouses of the district, and any young associates I had ever had were farmers’ daughters; so that I was not so entirely ignorant of farmhouse work as might at first sight have appeared. Besides which, a milky mother had always lowed from the cow-house in our small

homestead ; and a weanling calf had yearly gone forth to do credit to the stall and bring in a welcome addition to our limited income. True, as Janet often reminded me, I could neither milk nor bake ; but I understood the pickling of both meat and vegetables, the preserving of fruit, the making of butter and cheese, the rearing of poultry, the scouring and teasing of wool ; and though I could not spin, I had a theory instead that it was better and cheaper to patronize the mill. Above all, I had a firm belief in my own powers, which I hoped would not only carry me through the exigencies of everyday life, but also land me safely on the other side of many unseen emergencies.





CHAPTER II.

ENGAGED FOR THE SHORT TERM.

MY letter of application posted, there was nothing more to be done but to wait, and waiting is mostly weary work ; but I got through it, and it was not unduly protracted. On the third morning the well-watched postman brought me a letter, and in an instant I recognised the writing, just as I should have recognised the writer had he suddenly stood before me. I was sure of the man now ! what of the place ? I broke the seal.

‘ Mr. Dale will be glad to see Mrs. Forbes by the early train from Blackadder, and will meet her at the Dunsford Station on Tuesday morning, if convenient.’

‘ Mrs. Forbes ?’ I repeated to myself. ‘ Then he has never suspected my identity. So far well. Yes, Mr. Dale,’ I mentally replied, ‘ it will be quite convenient,’ — and then I took a sheet of paper and told him so.

And now for some testimonials. I could not present myself to a stranger and ask to be taken at

my own appraisement. I must produce certificates of character, or at least give references ; and for either I considered I should be at no loss.

In the first place, there was my own minister, a young man who had succeeded my father ; and there were the elders and office-bearers of our church, who would all be ready, I knew, to speak well of me. But the one to whom I most inclined was the parish minister of Blackadder, who had always kept up a friendly intercourse with us in my father's time, and had continued his kindly notice of me since.

Mr. Jamieson—for so was my old friend called—was a middle-aged bachelor, of an original, even an eccentric, turn of mind,—delighting in the old-fashioned mode of speech that was, even then, gradually dying out among the educated classes ; but with this, and some other peculiarities, combining much quiet dignity of manner, and a rare tact of suiting himself to the capacities of all with whom he came in contact.

‘So ye’re seeking after some certeeficates, my woman ?’ he said slowly, when I had explained my errand. ‘Aweel, aweel ! ye’ll dootless be nae waur o’ a gude word or twa ; but I aye think ower mony bolsters a great sign o’ wakeness. When the wa’s on the plumb it wants nae stoops ; an’ ye’re come o’ a weel-kent stock, an’ sud need little roosing.’¹

‘But I am seeking a place out of the district, sir,’ I remonstrated ; ‘and one cannot expect decent folks,

¹ Praising.

with characters of their own, to engage a stranger with none.'

'True, true—verra true, my woman,' he rejoined; 'it would say but little for them if they did. Careless dugs should a' be hanged, ye ken; but we canna stamp oot moral evil by sae summary a procedure.'

However, he gave me a first-rate certificate; and, taking his hint, I sought no further. Thus armed, and arrayed in a thick plaid-shawl of Janet's and my soberest bonnet,—for, truth to say, in my best hat and jacket I hardly looked the thing at which I was aiming,—I started for Dunsford Station; and on entering the waiting-room, I found Mr. Dale already seated there.

Here then was I, at last, face to face with the man round whom so many of my day-dreams had centred,—standing dumb before him, with the consciousness that I knew him better than maidenly modesty, and proper pride, and all those reticent feelings that hedge in our self-respect, would warrant; and afraid to speak lest I should betray myself. He neither rose on my entrance nor asked me to be seated, but sat quietly looking at me,—though I could plainly see that my presence or my appearance was the least of his thoughts,—and unless he could be roused from his abstraction, or indifference, or whatever it might be, he would go away without knowing what manner of person I was.

'I am Ann Forbes,' I at length ventured to remark in a wonderfully doubtful sort of way,

considering it was a fact I knew so well,—and indeed I had almost added 'please, sir,' but just that, as yet, I had not got myself quite into that abject state of mind; for there was a lordly Ahasuerus air about him that somehow made me feel as if I should have waited for the holding out of the golden sceptre.

'Ah, yes; Mrs. Forbes, to be sure,' he said, with a slight start. 'You wish for a housekeeper's place, I understand. Have you had some experience in the management of servants and farm-house matters generally?'

I confess I felt slightly nonplussed at the question; but fortunately remembering how I had always managed to get my own way with Janet,—though that kind of management was not perhaps quite what Mr. Dale meant,—I conceived I might own to some acquaintance with the art; and then I demurely asked how many domestics Mr. Dale might be in the habit of keeping.

'Two house-servants, besides a dairymaid, a young ploughman, and a groom. The rest of the men live at their own homes.'

Then I handed him my certificate.

'Ha! old Jamieson,' he muttered; and I jumped to the conclusion that my master in prospect had not developed the bump of reverence to any great degree. 'So he's your referee, is he? Do you belong to his church?'

'No, sir,' I replied. 'I am a member of the Relief body.'

‘A Dissenter! Ah! I believe that the most of my household are Dissenters. What is it they say of them? That they’ll neither steal nor swear; but they lie and cheat like the—ahem!’

Mr. Dale was looking more lively now. He evidently liked his little joke, and had forgotten for the moment, though I had not, our respective positions. So when he spoke so invidiously of us as a community, and alluded to his household being principally Dissenters, I thought he was taking an unfair advantage of me; and I replied with some firmness to the effect that I thought honourable servitude need be no reproach—nor yet was it any discredit to a Church to draw its members, for the most part, from among those who ate their bread in the sweat of their brow.

For, having made up my mind to be a servant, I had no intention of holding myself cheap because of it, or of allowing others to do so. So I set myself to ‘magnify mine office,’ and had already elaborated some theories on the subject, which, if rather crude and ill digested, served to fortify my resolutions and keep my mind easy at the time.

‘I beg your pardon, Mrs. Forbes,’ was Mr. Dale’s manly rejoinder, when he saw how his words had touched me. Only a noble nature will draw back the dart when it reaches the quick: while minds of coarser mould are never so happy as when they see the victim writhe under their thrusts; and, incited to madder mischief, they will drive the barbed arrow deeper and deeper.

So 'I beg your pardon,' said Mr. Dale. 'I am a Churchman myself; but I hope I can respect other people's opinions; and I never interfere.'

'And about the place, sir?' I said, getting back to business, of which he seemed strangely careless, after coming himself, and bringing me so far,—though, after all, the matter was of small importance to him, compared with its vital interest to me.

'Oh, I suppose you had better try it at any rate; it's only to leave if you don't like it.' Men are so unpractical! 'My sister is staying at Hallyards at present; but she and the house-servants will all be clearing out about the term,' he continued; 'and I will arrange for the groom to meet you here.' And Mr. Dale rose, to signify that everything was arranged and the interview at an end; and wages had never been so much as mentioned.

'Wi' guide us a', Miss Annie!' said old Janet, when I had given her the particulars; 'the man canna expec' tae get ye for yer meat! Cudna ye hae lookit up, and speered what fee he wad gie ye?'

'Just guess who he is, Nurse,' I said. 'Tall and dark, and a widower; and his name M. D.'

'M. D.!' repeated Janet, thoroughly mystified. 'That's what they pit till the doctors; but I houp it's nane o' them, for ye wad be expectit tae wark wi' the drugs; an' ye ken noucht aboot them, an' aiblins ye micht pison somebody.'

'He's no doctor, Janet,—you're forgetting he's a farmer; and I would not be surprised if he rides on the black horse still.'

Janet's face brightened in an instant. 'It'll be Matthew Dale, then, I'se warrant. Ewhow, lassie ! ye maun be tentie,¹ an' keep yer place wi' him, or I doot our auld-farrant ² nonsense micht be comin' i' yer head again.'

It was certainly not the way to keep it out, by reminding me of the days—ah, how long ago they seemed!—when foolish Janet used to say I would make a bonnie wife for the braw young farmer; for no better or wiser reason than just that it would be a good down-sitting for me.

'Never fear, Janet,' I said ; 'I'll keep my place,—and if I do not, he'll keep his. He's grander than ever ; and if you saw him straightening up his neck within his shirt collar, you would never think of evening him to anything below the Duke's daughter.'

'Dear sucks !' said Janet, with an ironical shrug. Had not prudence prevailed, she would most probably have turned round and told me I was good enough for the best farmer in the country.

The term at length drew near, and found me more than ready to enter on my new and too much unknown duties. I had neither seen nor heard of my master since the day on which he engaged me ; so I wrote a respectful note, informing him that I would, if he thought fit, 'start for Hallyards in three days' time ; and hoping, if perfectly convenient, to be met at the Dunsford Station, as Mr. Dale had promised.'

¹ Careful.

² Old-fashioned.

The events of that eventful week, during which I had been lifted, as it were, from the dunghill, like 'the man oppressed with poverty,' and given the prospect of earning a fair and honourable livelihood, came back to me often like a deceitful dream. Mr. Dale had not even offered me the 'arle-penny,' which would, at least, have been something tangible whereby to realize the fact of my engagement; and the whole affair had been so sudden in its inception, and so rapid in its movements towards an ulterior end, that I sometimes found myself wondering if it were not all a freak of the imagination, rather than an actual matter of business which would require to be implemented at no distant day. Not that I had the slightest wish to retire my bargain,—on the contrary, my chief fear was that, in some unexplained way, it might retire me; and as I received no reply to my letter, it was with rather a sinking heart that I bade adieu to my kind old friend, who put on her spectacles, the better to see the last of me. Dear old, faithful, loving Janet! Do we ever, in after-life, meet with friends like those who have guarded our youth—who put up so cheerfully with all our faults and follies as things of course, which must in no way alter or divert the current of their devotion? and when we reward them with the basest ingratitude, it is not a thing to be resented, but only mourned over, as an unwelcome token of indwelling depravity.



CHAPTER III.

HALLYARDS.

ON reaching Dunsford Station, I found that matters there were not so bad as I feared. A strong useful dog-cart, with horse to match, in charge of a smart but steady-looking young groom, was awaiting me; and beside it stood two women, so evidently belonging to our party, that I had little merit in setting them down at once as the new house-servants, who, like myself, were on their way to an untried home, but who, unlike me, had, most probably by habit, become hardened and inured to the painful uncertainty that must always, in degree, attend a change of domicile. I was feeling too much on my own account not to have some sympathy for them; so, with the view of making things pleasant, I turned round, as soon as we were fairly started, and remarked, as genially as I could, 'that we were highly favoured as to weather, and that the drive was really enjoyable.'

'They're well enough,' was the uncompromising reply of the elder and stouter of the two. 'If other things be right, there's nought in them to complain o'.'

It might be that the woman was down in spirits, and my too pronounced enthusiasm might have jarred on her feelings ; but I gathered from the half-defiant tone, and a titter from the younger girl, that they deemed it only prudent to inaugurate a system of self-assertion at once.

Besides, I have observed since then that, about term time, and particularly when changing places, servants are very like children just out of school, in the half-frantic exuberance of their words and the independence and swagger of their ways. And indeed it is not to be wondered at that, with months, perhaps years, of pent-up emotions, the froth and scum should rise to the surface and fly off when the pressure is removed. If servants were allowed at all times to give free expression to honest feeling, and more frequently indulged in occasions of perfect freedom, there would be less objectionable matter in the bulk when their natural spirits got the chance of an overflow. Old Nurse Janet has often told me, with glistening eyes, how my mother, her then young mistress, gave her a time of freedom every evening for what she called her 'gloaming shot,'—that is, a short period between 'the licht and the mirk' for recreation and amusement. Janet was a great stickler for this old-fashioned custom ; and who knows but

that some of the faithful service the good woman's children got from Janet was not a veritable return from this very 'gloaming shot'?

'Is Miss Dale still at Hallyards?' I then inquired of the groom, in a weak-minded attempt to air my knowledge of the family affairs before the new maids. I had better have kept quiet. It is as dangerous to trade on limited knowledge as on limited capital.

'Miss Dale!' echoed the groom. 'What Miss Dale? Is it Mrs. Ryland you mean—master's sister?—though she might be his mother for age and overbearingness,' commented this young philosopher, who evidently thought it no shame to sit in judgment on his master's friends.

'Your master told me his sister was staying in the house,' I said gravely, 'and I did not think it my business to ask her name.'

'Well, she's off this morning, anyway,' said he; 'and Tom, as gets his meat in the big house, he says, says he, "We may change for the better, but we scarcely can get worser;" and I says with Tom.'

'You're wrong there, Jim,' broke in the cook, who, though she had only made the young man's acquaintance within the hour, was already on the most easy and familiar terms with him,—'you're quite wrong, lad. I allus finds the best missus which is quite the lady.'

There was no mistaking the covert sneer implied in this remark, but 'Jim' was gallant enough to stick by me.

'It's my opinion,' said he, with the same wonderful freedom of address that had been employed to himself,—'it's my opinion that a spell o' Mrs. Ryland would hae done you no harm.'

'She couldn't hae harmed me,' replied the woman, with a toss of her head; 'I ne'er was in place yet, that I couldn't keep my own side.'

'Bragging's easy,' observed James sententiously, as he drew up at the gate. 'Scuttle down now,' he added unceremoniously, 'till I tool Miss up to the other door.'

Cook seemed to consider that now that we were all on the premises, it might be as well to subside. At any rate, she got quietly down, and, accompanied by her fellow-servant, trudged up to the back door, while the friendly young groom drove me round to a side entrance,—a mark of distinction that somewhat raised my drooping spirits.

The door stood open, and holding on by the handle was a buxom country maid, who in the kindest way took my bag and umbrella, and invited me to step in.

'The maister's oot,' she said, 'an' I'm the derry;¹ an' he said as how I was to let ye in whan ye cam', an' see that ye gat what ye wanted; an' there's a bit fire in the room aff the kitchen, an' the kettle's biling.'

A fire! and the prospect of a cup of tea! What more could mortal, of the feminine gender, want? So I followed Jessie, as I discovered 'the derry'

¹ Dairymaid.

was called, into a roomy kitchen, where we found my fellow-travellers standing rather forlorn-looking and somewhat crestfallen.

‘Well, girls,’ I said, trying to look as pleasant as possible,—for were we not in one boat? and how much better for us all to be pulling one way!—‘your neighbour Jessie here will show you where to lay aside your jackets, and then you can come and take a cup of tea with me this afternoon, before you begin to your work.’

‘Thank you, mem,’ said Jane, the housemaid; but cook was not to be won so easily, and I fore-saw no end of trouble with her. But I took no notice, and they both followed Jessie up a rather steep stair that led from the kitchen. She soon rejoined me. ‘Will you please to step ben?’¹ she said civilly—for I was still surveying the spacious kitchen, with its wide open fireplace, and fancying what a lively place it must be when all the servants were assembled. Jessie threw open a door as she spoke, and I stepped into as cosy a little room as could well be imagined. A small round table stood before the fire, and on it, besides the tea-dishes, some bread and butter, cream scones, and a few slices of cold ham.

‘How comfortable!’ I exclaimed. ‘Have I to thank you for all this, Jessie?’

‘Me! na, no’ me,’ said Jessie; ‘I dinna meddle wi’ the hoose-wark; but sae sune’s the maister’s sister was gane, he sent doun for Mistress Scott—

¹ The inner apartment.

that's oor foreman's wife—an' bade her mak' a'thing straucht for the hoosekeeper and the new servants.'

Even now I blush to think what consolation I found in that short sentence. Then Mr. Dale did not include me among the servants, and it was evident he intended me to occupy a distinct and separate sphere; and in spite of all my vaunted pride in my new position, it was no small comfort to find myself mistress of the snug sitting-room, all fitted up with linen-closets and cupboards, and my own bedroom opening through it—more like a housekeeper's room in a nobleman's castle than a similar apartment in a plain farmhouse. But, as I afterwards learned, Hallyards was an old mansion-house, and had been a place of some consideration when it was more the fashion for Scotch lairds to farm their own lands than it is now.

The new maids came in to tea, and made tremendous efforts to comport themselves according to their best notions of good manners. But I had every reason to fear that, though I might have flattered their vanity by my invitation, I had in no shape added to their comfort; and the ceremony had just come to an end—for they were much too genteel to do anything like justice either to themselves or to Jessie's 'spread'—by their putting their spoons into their cups, to signify they had finished, when Mr. Dale rode into the yard, gave some directions about his horse, and then went round to the front door, which I bade the house-maid go and open for him.

She came back immediately, open-mouthed. 'He said, "Tell Mrs. Forbes to speak, if you please" —quite proud an' high like. I would not like to anger him. He's fearfu' eneuch to look at as it is,' commented the thoughtless lassie.

'Ye silly gawky!' said cook; 'I wish I had the chance to look at him; but he'll no' likely send for me.'

'Not likely, cook,' I said, as I left the room to attend to my master's summons.

He was standing on the rug when I entered the dining-room, and said, 'Good afternoon, Mrs. Forbes,' with such a *grand seigneur* air, that, like poor Jane, I was a little thrown off my balance, and involuntarily dropped a curtsey. Perhaps it was the best recognition I could have given him, but it was certainly quite unpremeditated.

'I hear you have all got home,' he said. 'I hope you find things comfortable, and the new servants likely to do well?'

I accepted the question as one of those polite remarks which do not call for much rejoinder; and then I asked him at what hour he wished to dine—for Jessie the derry had mentioned incidentally, while waiting on us new hands at tea, that 'the maister aye tak's his denner aboot the supper-time.'

'I usually dine at six o'clock,' he said, as if surprised at the question. 'I hope there may be some supplies in the house; but I think Mrs. Ryland would see to that.' He took out his watch

as he spoke. 'It's close on four o'clock now, but I suppose you can manage dinner in two hours, among you ?'

'I will speak to the cook at once,' I replied ; 'there is a good fire in the kitchen, but I have not seen the larder yet ;' and, glad enough to cut short the interview, I hurried from the room.

'Now if that woman fails me !' was my mental ejaculation as I took my way to the kitchen—for it lay quite beyond my experience ordering six o'clock dinners, and unless my coadjutor proved more tractable than she appeared to be, I would most likely make a hash of it.

'Cook,' I said, in my most dulcet tones,—for conscience does make cowards of us all,—'can you have dinner ready for master at six o'clock ?'

'It all depends on what there's to ready,' she replied, pursing up her mouth in most unpromising fashion.

'Of course I have not seen the larder yet. But what can you make in the time ?' I asked blandly—for, much as I despised myself for it, I fancied my only chance lay in temporizing. But I daresay the woman saw through me, and, as she discovered her advantage, got more and more determined not to help me.

'It's for you to say what you want, and me to say if it can be done,' she replied.

Jessie and the housemaid were washing up the tea-dishes, and I called to the former to come and show me what provisions were in the house.

She came at once, with a key in her hand, and threw open the door of as good a larder as one could wish to see. But I did not notice that then: indeed, I had hardly the skill to know good from bad at the time, and I was half desperate with the sense of my responsibility lying heavy upon me, and my too palpable ignorance rising up to condemn me. What I principally saw was—a good-sized roast of beef, a chicken ready plucked, some mutton-chops, and plenty of eggs and butter on the shelves, only waiting the intervention of some good fairy to turn them into palatable edibles.





CHAPTER IV.

AN OPPORTUNE ALLY.

‘**C**OOK,’ I called, ‘come here and let us fix on something at once.’

She came, but with slow unwilling steps, as I could hear,—for the larder lay in the outer passage, where there was a fine current of air,—and glanced round.

‘There’s a plenty of everything,’ she said critically; ‘but it’s not my place to fix.’

Here was a dilemma! My heart sank into my shoes, and I could almost have turned my back on Hallyards without more ado. I knew nothing of how our master liked to live; worse still, I knew very little of how any one, in such circumstances as he appeared to be, lived at all. For our life at home had been more of a fight to keep the wolf from the door than what really deserved the name of living; and when Janet and I had got the boys’ hunger appeased with broth or porridge, according to the time of day, and a bit of fresh meat for my

father, whose weakly digestion could not stand the salt fare on which the boys lived,—and of which luckily they got too little, even of that, to hurt them,—she and I were thankful to sit down to a cup of tea, sometimes accompanied—with many rueful thoughts at our extravagance—by buttered toast.

And now I had taken this situation, hoping that the servants would make up for my deficiencies, as many another young housekeeper has done, to her discomfiture; and here I had fallen in with one woman, at least, who was probably a proficient in her own department, but who would not lift a finger to help me in mine.

I took out my watch—a quarter of an hour gone already, and nothing done. I turned to Jessie. ‘Can you tell us anything of master’s tastes, and how he likes to be served?’

But Jessie knew nothing. Though she had been six months about the place, and was an obliging, good-tempered girl, she had ne’er, she said, fashed her thum’¹ wi’ what didna lie tae her chaire.

I had not time to expostulate with the girl then, but I have since found that it is the course pursued by five out of every six servants; instead of laying themselves out to pick up a little useful knowledge, they even take a certain false pride in attending to no work but their own.

I turned to the cook again; but I felt weary with the struggle, and could barely command my voice or my temper. ‘You see we are both new hands

¹ Troubled herself,

here,' I said, 'and I am sure master will be reasonable, and overlook mistakes, so you had better go to work and lose no more time.'

'If I go to work at all,' said she, 'it will be in my own way ; and the first thing I'll do will be to go straight to the master, and get my orders from him.'

So this was my tormentor's little game ; and I now saw there was more under it than mere perversity.

'No,' I said ; 'I am here to stand between the master and the servants, and if you will have orders, you can take down that beef and roast it ;' and I drew myself up with all the dignity I could muster.

Alas for me and my dignity !

'Roast a piece of beef like that in an hour and a half !' exclaimed the woman in cutting tones. 'There's nine or ten pounds to the good ; and I can tell you what you don't seem to know, it would take double the time.'

My antagonist certainly seemed to be getting the best of it. No wonder ! Knowledge is power ; and she evidently knew her business, while I was almost wholly ignorant of mine. But at this critical juncture a sharp tap at the outer door preceded the entrance of a brisk, tidy-looking woman, who put her head into the pantry, where we were all assembled, Jane and Jessie having joined us, in their anxiety to see which side would win.

'Gude nicht tae ye, mem, and girls a,' she said ; 'the bairnses' faither's just at his supper, an' I ran

doun tae see how ye war getting on, an' gif the maister's denner was makin' ready ; for he's a particular man aboot his denner is oor maister—as weel he may, for it's the only meal, to speak o', that he seems tae hae ony stamack for.'

I concluded at once that this was the foreman's wife of whom Jessie had spoken ; and, though she seemed to have adopted a very roundabout way of indicating her better-half, I hoped she would be direct enough in other matters to give me some effectual aid.

'Thank you for coming down, Mrs. Scott,' I said ; 'we're nearly at a dead-lock here—nothing being done, and the dinner-hour drawing on.'

'Dear sakes ! dae ye say sae ?' rejoined Mrs. Scott in her breezy tones. 'An' ye'll be the new cook, I'se warrant,' turning to cook, whose sullen aspect, I think, she had already taken stock of ; 'an' the suner ye fa' tae yer wark the better, my woman ! Neist tae bad cookin', there's naething pits oor maister mair oot than haein' tae wait past his hours.'

'I've been ready to begin this half-hour,' said cook, 'but'—with a savage look at me—'when ye're bidden tae roast a jint like that in half the time it would take, ye'll see if it was worth while fa'in' to, as ye speak o', at a !'

'Tuts, lass !' said my new ally ; 'we maunna be shiftless ! If there's no' time for the beef, there's mair nor time for the chuckie ;¹ an' wi' a dish o'

¹ A barn-door fowl.

cutlets, an' a pancake, or a jam whummeler' (which I afterwards discovered to be Mrs. Scott's name for an omelet, and which might either be a corruption of the word, or descriptive of the mode of dishing up—to whummle, to turn over), 'the man,' she concluded, 'will be waur to please than oor maister gin he turns up his nose at it.'

Cook had no further excuse for delay, and she set about her work with a dexterity and despatch that left no room to doubt that, but for her temper, she was a valuable servant; and by six o'clock Jane was setting before her master as well cooked a dinner of three courses as any single man need wish to sit down to.

First having made sure that no more supervision was wanted in the kitchen, I invited Mrs. Scott to step into my room and rest for a little; for, from the effectual way in which she had disposed of my refractory help, and set her to her work, I thought her friendly intervention might again be useful.

'I maunna stop abune a minute,' she said, 'for the bairnses' faither'll be ready tae gang oot agen by noo, an' the bairns are a' young, an' the wean i' the cradle is unco waukrife¹ wi' an e'e-teeth, sae I maunna stop. The gudeman,' she continued, 'has been foresman wi' the maister ten years gin the time, an' I was the derry here mysel' whan him an' me first forgaithered.'

'I fancied you might have been a cook yourself,' I said, 'by the way you arranged the dinner.'

¹ Sleepless.

'Na, na! I ne'er gat sae far up,' she replied; 'but I was aye gledging roun', tae see if I could learn oucht, whan my ain wark was by; an' I've faund it unco handy sin' I gat a hoose o' my ain. Mony a bit denty meal o' meat I ken hoo tae ready noo, wi' what, at ae time, I wad hae thought was gude for noucht but the swine-kit.'

Here, then, was a woman whose natural perceptions had raised her above the common herd and those unreasoning prejudices that make the ordinary run of servants so blind to their true interests.

'It's a pity,' I remarked, 'but there were more like you, Mrs. Scott. There's the dairymaid, now —she does not seem to lay herself out to learn anything.'

'Oh, 'deed no! I daursay no! Jess is a fine, gude-tempered lass, but oh, she's thoughtless! An' ye'll need tae keep an e'e on her an' Tam,' continued my visitor, 'for whane'er he's aboot the onstead, her wark is sure tae lie i' that han'. I've fairly kenned her pour the new milk down on the byre floor when she was feeding a calf, that she might rin an' help him aff wi' the graith. Oh, sirs! she is glaiket¹; but they're a' much of a muchness when there's a callant² within cry.'

I could not help wondering how Mrs. Scott had conducted her own courtship, and whether it was on the old principle of set a thief to catch a thief that she was so hard on poor Jessie. Then I asked what kind of youth this Tom was? for I had seen

¹ Light-headed.

² Young man.

all the household but him, and he seemed to be rather quoted amongst them.

'Oh, 'deed he's no' much tae look at, for he's ferny-tickled¹ into the very een-holes ; but he's a real character for a' that. It was Tam that gat us rid o' the maister's sister ; an' ye may weel believe me, there wasna ane tae dicht an e'e whan we saw the last o' her.' And, forgetting all about the bairns and their unfortunate progenitor, the good woman slipped down on a chair, and proceeded to tell me how Tom, dining one day alone, on 'nobut some tatties, an' a wheen banes wi' heat a morsel on them, for they had been a' pyket² afore—had ordered Jess to bring the maister. An' the maister he comes marching ben, wi' the papers in his han', an' he says, "Well, Tom, and what is it?" An' Tam gi'es the banes a turn ower wi' his fork, an', says he, "Jist tac see if ye expec' me tae eat thae." Jess tell't us afterhins³ that for a minute the maister's brow was like a thunner-clud, an' she thought she wad hae drappit i' the floor ; an' than he gaed a bit lauch like, an' says he, "Did you send for me to help you with them?" But Tam jist hung his head, like a skelpit collie, for his wuts had gaen clean wud⁴ ; and forbye the lassies war a' keekin' in at the door, for the thing had got win' ; an' what wi' fear, an' what wi' ferlying,⁵ they war a' jist in a fair trim'le. "Then, Tom," said oor maister, "I think the best plan will be for you to

¹ Freckled.

² Picked.

³ Afterwards.

⁴ Had lost his senses.

⁵ Wondering.

catch a sheep and kill it to yourself. I don't see how else I can help you ;" an' wi' that he turned awa' and left puir Tam, an' the lassies a' sniggering an' jeering at him, an' begging for a bit o' the sheep. But the neist we heard o't was, that the maister was adverteesin' for a hoosekeeper. But sirs ! I'm forgettin' mysel' a'thegither ; an' we'll be pleased tae see ye, mem, whan ye can win oor length ; an' gin there's ony orra thing I can help ye wi', I'll do it, an' walcome.' And off Mrs. Scott ran to her bairns and their faither.

I had another altercation with cook before bed-time about the morning's breakfast ; and it seemed to me, if I was to have a fight over every meal, that my life would hardly be worth living ; and instead of becoming, like the Irishman, 'blue-moulded for want of a bathing,' I would be getting mentally black and blue from the frequency of my conflicts.

Jessie had managed to gather herself sufficiently together to tell us that 'the maister aye tak's his parritch i' the mornin' ;' and cook at once decided, in her own mind, that this was a plebeian taste quite undeserving of encouragement, and stoutly declared that she would not make porridge twice in one morning, not if she had to flit for it ; and by this she stood, unaffected by prayer or proposal of mine ; and I went to bed in anything but cheerful spirits, or with much confidence in my managing powers. It did not strike me then, as I came to see afterwards, that the woman was not really serious in the

line of conduct she had chosen to assume ; that her object was to frighten me into compliance with her views by raising up obstacles to mine—trading on my ignorance, which she was not slow to perceive, and presuming on my inability to help myself if she chose to fail me. Had I only been able to defy her, how different would my position have been ! But I dared not proceed to extremities, or threaten her with dismissal, which was the least she deserved, knowing that I would have been worse off without her, bad as she was. So I called up, on my sleepless couch that night, all the Christian precepts I could remember which taught me to suffer long and be kind ; and with the light of a new day came unlooked-for relief, to meet me half-way on my uphill journey, and light up the glimmering track of love and duty.

Under the softening influence of a good night's rest, the woman's obduracy had somewhat given way ; and though she had spoiled my first night at Hallyards, I freely forgave her when I saw the improvement in tone and temper, and how she set about her work in her cool, capable, clever way. Mr. Dale, like the Baron of Bradwardine, sat down to a steaming bowl of well-made porridge, flanked on one side by butter-milk and on the other by cream ; and this was merely a cushion on which he might lay as much substantial fare as he chose.

It seemed to me altogether a wasteful breakfast, particularly if it were true what Mrs. Scott said of our master, that his dinner was the chief meal of

the day. But I have always found that working people, in whom constant exercise produces a corresponding activity of the digestive powers,—or, as they would perhaps describe it, a sinking at the pit of the stomach,—judge by quantity, irrespective of quality ; and that, therefore, the ordinary run of servants are quite unfit to regulate supplies, and have little or no discrimination as to what constitutes a sufficiency.





CHAPTER V.

WARMING TO THE WORK.

WITHIN the course of three months or so, we had all got pretty well shaken down into our places. We had taken each other's measure, and had shaped our conduct accordingly. None of us, I think, were fools,—there might be wickedness, but certainly weakness was no characteristic of the establishment; and, as a matter of expediency, we set ourselves, after a little preliminary skirmishing, to 'preserving the honour, and performing the duties, belonging to every one in their several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors, or equals.'

Cook was the last to see it; but, under the combined influence of two concurrent forces—viz., self-interest and a strong *penchant* for her fellow-servant, Tom—she, too, succumbed after a time, and became as civil and obliging to me, who held her appointment in my hand, as at the first she had been the reverse. With this hero of the

kitchen himself I did not make much progress towards acquaintanceship,—not from any want of advances on my part, for I wished all the servants to look on me in the friendly light of an adviser, rather than the inimical one of a supervisor ; but Tom manifested a good deal of reticence and stand-offishness towards the whole of the household,—and perhaps this was the grand secret of his success with the fair sex ; for while James, the groom, a far better-looking lad, and one who really laid himself out to be pleasant, was of no account whatever, Tom had all the girls at his feet, and could turn any of them round his finger.

For myself, I often caught myself wondering if my master found me up to the mark ; and, with all my powers of mind and body, I set myself to work up to a high standard. I invested in books on household management, and studied with deep interest all the information I could glean on the subject ; and by watching cook, and occasionally giving her a hand at a busy time, I was enabled to reduce my theoretical knowledge to actual practice. Many mistakes I doubtless made, as all learners must do, but they were passed over in silence, if observed at all ; and I tried, by extra attention and diligence in my calling, to atone for the deficiencies of my early training.

For the more I saw of Hallyards and its bearings, the more I liked it,—everything plentiful and orderly about it ; and if he, who was still to me the chief figure in the foreground, was a little

proud, and carried his head a trifle high, why, I liked him all the better for it,—quite agreeing with cook in her aristocratic tastes about those she served,—and, if I was to have a master, much preferring one who, as she would have said, was quite the gentleman.

Soon after my arrival at Hallyards, my master had given me the various pass-books that were kept with the Dunsford tradesmen, and from them I gleaned much valuable information as to the different commodities that were in use in the house. I knew Mrs. Ryland had been at the head of affairs for the twelve months succeeding Mrs. Dale's death, but I could hardly have believed that a change of housekeeper would, or could, have made so marked a difference in the household expenditure. What a keen, tight hold the former lady must have kept! What a splendid surplus her financial year showed! No wonder poor Tom had been so deeply wounded in what was probably the seat of his tenderest affections,—his stomach! And how unnecessary, and indeed unjustifiable, such remorseless niggardliness appeared! or else Mrs. Dale had been going at a pace that could only have resulted in utter ruin. But I could not think so, for my master gave me the old books, dating several years back, and I fancied he intended me to draw my own conclusions, and take a pattern from the late wife, rather than from my immediate predecessor.

But this was mere conjecture on my part, for

my master rarely entered into any explanations, but allowed his actions to speak for themselves,—a strictly masculine mode of procedure, but very baffling to poor weak womankind, prone to indulge in much laboured circumlocution herself, and missing it sorely when brevity is adopted as the soul of wit.

I must not forget to mention that, when giving me the books, my master also offered me a ten-pound note, for odd expenses, as he said ; but this I refused. It was the height of summer, when the dairy and the poultry-yard were in the full flush of productiveness ; and every market-day would, I knew, bring in enough for items, and leave a handsome balance.

So I set up a day-book and a ledger ; and when, at the end of the first three months, I took the pass-books up to the dining-room for my master's inspection, I also took my principal account-book, and showed him the result of my quarter's house-keeping in black and white, with all the details of Dr. and Cr. duly specified, and the balance struck, which at the same time I handed to him. He seemed pleased, and certainly I was best pleased that he drew a chair to the table at which I stood, and, seating himself, deliberately proceeded to examine my books ; for I dreaded nothing so much as that, after all my work, he might hardly look at either them or me.

'I did not guess I had so expert a book-keeper in the house,' he said. 'Are you not afraid, Mrs.

Forbes, of tempting me to give you some extra work? for it is a thing I am not good at myself.'

I replied that I would only be too happy to be useful, and that my time was at his disposal,—words of course, patent facts, one feels so small in mentioning, and on which it would be smaller still to be silent. But nothing came of it then,—only that he seemed to appreciate my humble efforts, and asked me, as he often did, if I had all I wanted. Pity me! I could not tell him that I had not. I durst not, at that early stage, even whisper it to myself.

Then he wrote out a cheque, and bade me go into Dunsford, as soon as convenient, and settle the accounts,—a commission I discharged next day, for James had standing orders to drive me to Dunsford, or any other place, when I wanted him; and at the town, every one was loud in praise of my master. The Dunsford shopkeepers could hardly find words to express their admiration of him,—above all, for the regularity with which he settled his accounts; and many a fervent exclamation I heard from them that 'it would be good for the country if there were more like him.'

After that, I think Mr. Dale began to ponder over in his mind who or what I might be,—two considerations that most people would have made sure of, in a stranger, before intrusting household property to her care. But I suppose he had taken my face—an honest enough face, he has told me since—and Mr. Jamieson's certificate as a guarantee,

and given himself no further trouble on the subject, till, seeing my book-keeping accomplishments, his curiosity had been aroused, and he had made some inquiries.

One day, when I met him in the yard, just as he came home from Dunsford, he lifted his hat to me, and asked why I had never told him that I was a daughter of the Rev. Mr. Forbes, his old neighbour.

‘Probably, I think, because you never asked me,’ I replied, with a laugh; and as he did not seem to have anything further to say, I walked on to the poultry-yard, whither I was going at the time with a feed of oats for my feathered flock.

When I came back to the gate, where I had left him, I was surprised to see him still standing there, holding it open that I might pass through, and fastening it behind me,—an attention I never expected from my rather haughty master. After that, I could not but notice, he never again addressed me as Mrs., but always called me Miss Forbes; and when I met him outside—but that was not often—he generally lifted his hat to me, which I thought a very inconvenient arrangement as between master and servant.

Some weeks later he presented himself one morning at the door of my sitting-room, with an open letter in his hand.

‘May I come in for a minute, Miss Forbes?’ he said. ‘There is a small matter of detail here which lies in your way.’

Of course I could not say him nay ; but up to this time he had always sent for me when he had orders to give, and I should have preferred that he had kept up the custom.

‘This is a letter from my sister,’ he continued ; ‘her son, Lieutenant Ryland, is coming home with his ship—in fact, I believe he is at Portsmouth now ; and as he likes Hallyards better than his mother’s place, she wishes to come here to receive him.’

I had heard from Mrs. Scott that Mrs. Ryland had an only son, who was in the navy ; that she had spoiled him, as a boy, for her own pleasure, and that now, as a man, he insisted on the same system being carried on for his ; that mother and son were often at daggers drawn ; and that, but for the uncle, who managed to keep matters from coming to a crisis, they would hardly be on speaking terms.

I therefore rather admired the diplomatic tone of my master’s communication, and inquired which rooms should be prepared. For we had quite a choice of bedrooms at Hallyards, all handsomely furnished, and kept in habitable order ; but during my time only one had been occupied—a bachelor’s room to the back, which Mr. Dale told me to prepare one evening for a cattle-dealer who had come with him from Dunsford market to look at some of our stock.

But he declined all interference on this occasion. ‘Mrs. Scott and you can fix about the rooms,’ he

said ; 'she knows Mrs. Ryland's tastes, and you know enough about the house to see what will suit best. There is one thing, however, I would like to mention—I do not wish you to give up your authority in any way ; and I think you had better take your meals with us, and give my sister the benefit of your company when you can spare the time.'

But a revolution like that would, I knew, upset all the order I had got established both above stairs and below. For at Hallyards, like too many of the old Scottish mansion-houses, the kitchens and servants' apartments were on the basement storey,—a style of architecture explicable enough in towns, where ground feus are high and building-stances sold by the yard, but utterly indefensible in the free open country, where all God's creatures, if they have nothing else, should at least have plenty of light and air. Besides this notion of being near my work, and on the spot to guide and direct my young domestics, I had a lurking dislike, from all I had heard of both Mrs. Ryland and her son, to throw myself more in their way than was absolutely necessary. My master saw my hesitation.

'Just as you please,' he said ; 'but it's where you ought to be, you know.' And he walked off without another word.

Mrs. Ryland arrived at Hallyards that day week, driving out from Dunsford in a hired carriage. I had arrayed myself for the occasion in a plain

black dress, and stuck a little lace cap over my hair, which was rather too shiny and curly for the sober, douce personage I wished to appear ; and, with some inward trepidation, I took my place at the front entrance to give my master's sister a fitting and respectful reception. As she stepped from the cab, I saw she was a tall, portly woman, with aquiline features and a good complexion ; and might have counterfeited 'blue blood' very successfully, but for a certain want of refinement in tone and bearing, which detracted greatly from her otherwise rather imposing appearance.

'You can take my luggage to my room,' was her salutation to me, in acknowledgment of mine. 'The housemaid, I presume ?' she added, as her keen eye travelled all over me, in what appeared to me to be very unfriendly scrutiny.

I know I did not look one bit like the housemaid, and that the affront was quite intentional ; so I stood quietly with my hands crossed in front of me, and, turning to Jane, who was in attendance, passed on Mrs. Ryland's order. I then calmly inquired if she would step into the drawing-room and wait till Mr. Dale came in, or if she would go to her room at once ?

I fancy my self-possession threw her off her guard, for she made me a little bow, and replied, quite civilly, that, as she had seen her brother at Dunsford, she would prefer going straight up-stairs.

With little liking for the office, I deemed it no

less than my duty to show her to her room, and, when there, to ask if Jane could do anything for her. I took special care, after what I had seen, to offer no services of my own ; but adding that the girl would be back with hot water presently, I left her standing in the middle of the floor, looking just a little extinguished.

But further experience showed me that Mrs. Ryland was not so easily snuffed out. As her brother had hinted, she made unceasing attempts to resume her old place in the household ; and this end she tried to effect by ignoring me, and giving her orders directly to the servants. But as household tradition had nothing good to say of her, and as cook's love-affair had just then reached a critical stage, when my displeasure might have brought about a tragic end, our guest found herself outwitted on every hand ; and, as I came to know afterwards, began to restrict her aggressions to moral — or rather immoral — suasion ; in which diplomatic art she scored no greater triumph than in her strategical movements.





CHAPTER VI.

OUR SAILOR.

ISAW very little of Mrs. Ryland after our first encounter—indeed, I imagine we tacitly agreed to keep well apart; and about a week after her arrival, James was sent into Dunsford with the dog-cart to meet the Lieutenant and bring him to Hallyards. I saw him arrive, not from the hall door this time,—for as his mother and uncle were both there to receive him, I did not obtrude myself,—but from the upper sash of my sitting-room window, which was in a projecting angle of the house, and just high enough to take in the drive, the terrace, and the door. A sailor every inch he looked, as he tumbled rather than stepped from the cart, giving a hitch to his nether garments, and then scuttling up the steps. Bold and fearless he appeared to be, rather handsome, stout, and well built; but perhaps not much of a gentleman, as he gave his hand to his uncle first, before turning round to receive his mother's rather effusive embrace.

And this was all I saw of him then ; but I was not long in making his acquaintance.

The following morning, just as I was leaving my bedroom,— which I generally did about seven o'clock,—he walked into my sitting-room as if he had known me all my life, and coolly said,—

‘Good morning, Mrs. Forbes. Is there a drop of beer to be had, do you know?’ Then, pulling himself up, and staring at me,— which he had neglected to do at the first,—‘ You are Mrs. Forbes, ain’t you? But, hang it, you look precious young, and—different altogether ! ’

Taking no notice of the comment on my appearance, I replied that there was plenty of beer in the house ; but would he not rather wait for breakfast, which would be ready in an hour? or I could give him a cup of tea at once, as I was just about to make it for my own morning meal.

‘ Oh, what does a fellow want with tea ! ’ he exclaimed disgustedly. ‘ No ; give me a glass of bitter—that’s the stuff to cool a man’s throat in the morning.’

I did not see why his throat should need cooling ; but, as I could not very well tell him so on our short acquaintance, I brought a pint bottle of Bass, and, pouring it into a glass, handed it to him.

As he took it with his right hand, he threw his left arm round me, and was about to ‘ pree my mou,’ as he called it,—not in an impassioned way, but quite off-hand and easy, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I started back rather

suddenly, and some—perhaps a good part—of the beer missed its mission, so far as cooling Lieutenant Ryland's throat went.

'Oh, so you're one of the stuck-up ones!' he said carelessly. 'What's the good of being so stand-offish?—it's all in the way of fun.'

'It's a kind of fun I don't much like,' I replied gravely; and then I busied myself about my breakfast, which I always prepared with my own hand, and set out from a little service I kept in my sitting-room, hoping all the time my morning visitor would take himself off and leave me alone.

But nothing seemed further from his thoughts. Seating himself on the end of a strong deal table that stood before the window, and humming some sailor's ditty, he set himself to watch my proceedings.

'Avast there!' he cried, as I popped an egg into a saucepan of boiling water; 'ain't you going to have one yourself?'

'That is for myself,' I said laconically.

'Hold on! Didn't you invite me to breakfast?'

'Not to both beer and breakfast.'

'Now don't be stingy as well as saucy, Mrs. Forbes,' he said; 'either bring me another bottle of beer or give me a cup of tea, for I'm not going to cool my heels waiting about till my uncle and the old lady ship their hammocks.'

'I'm afraid you'll be expected to breakfast with them, and not in the housekeeper's room, Mr. Ryland,' I said respectfully; for I thought, by

showing him some respect, he might be led to respect himself and his position, which he evidently did not overvalue at present.

He merely changed 'Black-eyed Susan' for 'The Bay of Biscay'; and then he added as a recitative, and partly, I understood, as a reply to my remark, 'Fair expectations demand a fair fulfilling, but a nursing-mother for a six-foot child is mo' dan dis der chile is going to stand.'

I could not conceal a smile as he droned this absurd impromptu through his nose; and having so far allowed him to see his advantage, there was nothing for it but to humour his fancy. Indeed I did not see my way to any other course, for he looked a man of thirty if he looked a day; and though there was something childish about him to me,—who had had no experience but of grave, sedate lads, on whose young shoulders the sobering circumstances of an early struggle had put old heads,—yet he seemed to have plenty of firmness, and probably not a little of the fool's obstinacy—the most hopeless of all mental weaknesses to fight with. Had I known then what I came to know afterwards, I might have saved myself much grief and pain by keeping him at a distance from the first; but in retrospection it is so much easier to spot our mistakes than to measure at the time the full consequences of what we may be doing for the best.

So I brought out another cup and plate, and fetched some cold beef from the pantry; and when he saw he was to get his own way, he settled quietly

down and fell into an entertaining vein of talk, and gave me some stirring accounts of foreign shores and shipboard life, that came to me like a delicious whiff from the outer world, of which I knew so little.

He had been cruising with the Flying Squadron ; but, having volunteered for foreign service, he was now awaiting his ship, and an appointment, he said, might come any of these mornings.

He also informed me, in nautical language, that he thought I made a first-rate figure-head for the old hulk ; and also that his uncle had done well to change the Commodore. Disrespect for his mother, both implied and expressed, was apparently the worst feature in his character at this time ; and to me, whose cherished memory of a 'vanished hand' was all I had left to me of a mother's love, this parade of filial disloyalty seemed little less than horrible.

But there was another vice that he did not display so ostentatiously, but which was not the less surely gaining the mastery over him ; and both the one and the other were the natural outcome of a loose moral tone and an unmanly non-resistance to impulse and appetite.

His advent among us was the signal for a very unlooked-for movement on his mother's part. Among many ruling passions, one reigned supreme —she was a devotee to whist ; and a rubber—which with her meant two, or three, or half a dozen if she could compass them—came between her and all her

other foibles. A whist-party implies a quorum ; and, much as she must have disliked her errand, she positively came to my room one evening to ask, Could I play ? and would I join them ? Of course I could play. In our communion, cards were only forbidden to the pastors,—the prohibition did not extend to the flock, or even to the elders !—and in the houses of my father's hearers I had seen stakes played for by grim old bigots (who drew in the winnings with eldritch mirth when fortune favoured them, and let them out like drops of blood when the fickle goddess frowned) that would have astonished Mrs. Ryland, and those who, like her, merely played for amusement.

Then would I be good enough to come up to the drawing-room when the gentlemen came in from dinner ? She would ring twice, she said, and I would know I was wanted.

Accordingly I smoothed my hair and washed my hands, putting on my mother's diamond ring. For my mother had been a squire's daughter ; and this heirloom, and some gentle blood, that had doubtless been transmitted to us, was all that remained of our ancestral state. I had barely finished my few simple preparations when the bell, as Mrs. Ryland had suggested, rang twice. But I knew the smallness of the woman with whom I had to deal too well to allow her to establish such a method of communication between us ; so Jane as usual attended to the summons, doubtless wondering at its urgency, and presently she

brought me a message that they were all waiting for me in the drawing-room.

I went at once, and at a glance I saw that Mrs. Ryland's brow was clouded; but my master received me with consideration and respect, and asked his sister if she remembered my father,—an overture in my favour to which she declined to respond.

But if the mother was retiring and ungracious, the son, on the other hand, quite embarrassed me by his attentions; and the more he saw his mother's annoyance deepen, the more determinedly he persisted in forcing me into notice,—even seizing my hand and detaining it within his own, while he made the poor lady examine 'the beautiful gem that sparkled' on my finger 'like spray in the sunshine.'

She had real cause for provocation; but it was her own son, and not poor me, she should have blamed; perhaps she included us both in one category, for she played with an emphasis and impetuosity that was more like the charge of an angry foe than the dexterous thrust and parry of a skilful opponent; and as she drew in the tricks with a sweep of her large bony hand, I could almost have fancied—for that kind of unholy feeling is contagious, and I daresay I was somewhat excited myself—that I saw the enemy of mankind clutching at lost souls.

We played far on into the night, for at the end of every rubber Mrs. Ryland insisted on 'one

more,' for the reversible reason, that when she lost she might have her revenge, and when she won, 'Edward and his partner may have another chance.' At last my master, to my inexpressible relief, brought matters to a full stop; and, bowing to them all round, I left the room, escorted by the Lieutenant. But this civility, I soon discovered, was for a very selfish end.

'You don't object to a pipe, I hope, Miss Forbes?'

He had dropped the 'Mrs.' too; not quietly, like his uncle—it was not in Lieutenant Ryland's nature to do anything quietly.

'It's absurd, you know,' he said, 'a young girl like you' (reader, I was no longer young, but it suited Master Ned to call me so)—'a young girl, and our equal any day! The Dales have always ploughed the land, and the Rylands have ploughed the main, and hang it if I can see why my mother should give herself airs over it!'

Then Mr. Ryland pulled out his pipe and was about to light it.

'I cannot have you smoking here, Mr. Ryland,' I said, with all the firmness I could muster.

'Oh, don't you like it? You'll never do for first mate if you try to put the sailor's pipe out.'

'You can smoke in the kitchen if you like—you can't be here;' and I held the door open for him to pass out, which he unwillingly did.

'You'll give a fellow a drop of beer, at any rate

—and your company,’ he added, rather sheepishly for him, I thought.

‘Yes, you can have some beer,’ I said, for there had been nothing going since dinner-time, Mrs. Ryland being too intent on her play, and perhaps unwilling, from other motives connected with my being there, to have tea brought up. So I poured out some beer for the young man, and put it on the kitchen table to be ready for him when he had finished his smoke.

‘Come, now, stay and have a yarn.’

‘No, indeed, Mr. Ryland ; I ought to have been asleep hours ago.’

‘Well, then, good-night,’ and he held out his hand ; but mine were both occupied with the empty bottle and the candlestick, so I gave him a bow, and, once within my own premises, I drew the bolt of my door, and felt at peace.





CHAPTER VII.

DUMMY.

OUR whist-parties went on for some time with growing vigour, till one evening Mr. Dale found himself obliged to go straight from the dinner-table to a distant part of the farm, that the master's eye might overlook, and the master-mind direct, some momentous question that honest Scott had confessed to be beyond his skill. For our master, like a good general, while reposing perfect confidence in his staff, was ever ready to step in at a critical point and supervene, on our less tutored minds, the decision at which we found it so difficult to arrive.

One of our party being thus absent, I hoped that in consequence Mrs. Ryland would forego her rubber for that evening; but the demon of play had her in his grasp, and rather than lose the evening, which to her was precious only as it yielded the excitement she so dearly loved, her son and I were invited to join her at three-handed whist.

Disliking it more than ever,—the only element that made the game tolerable being awanting, but not feeling equal to telling them so uncomplimentary a story,—I was obliged to obey the summons. On entering the drawing-room, I observed with dismay that poor Ned was decidedly beery; and we conducted our play under difficulties, the chief of which were, that Ned would always stop to talk, addressing his parent as 'Mother Carey,' and when I joined with her in trying to frown him down, declaring that I must be one of the 'chickens,' for that they were always seen in dirty weather. It was no use remonstrating with him; every attempt we made to call him to order was 'just another sign to me,' he said, 'of the impending storm these ill-omened birds foretell. But if you think I am to take in sail for that, and the wind abaft the beam, you are entirely out of your reckoning.' By all which, I suppose, though I did not understand him, and his mother was too angry to try, that he meant to express his thorough contempt for us.

He could speak pretty well, but his mind seemed to be in a strange state of confusion; and he was so earnest over it, and thought every one wrong but himself, that though on the whole a painful exhibition, there was at the same time a something provocative of the risible faculties as well,—all the more so that it felt wrong to laugh at wrong-doing; and untimely laughter is ever the most difficult to restrain.

After an hour or so my master returned from his ride, and joined us in our pursuit of pleasure under difficulties. We then abandoned the three-handed game (which we had been playing with the dummy, taken up in rotation by each player) for regular whist, and both Mrs. Ryland and I hoped that Ned would try and regain his lost balance, under the sobering influence of his uncle's presence. But alas! dummy had been too prominent a feature in the evening's amusement for him all at once to disentangle his mind from its seductions.

'Now, mother, you'll take dummy,' he gravely said, when his uncle had divided the cards.

'Arrange your hand, sir,' replied his mother, with pardonable severity, while I saw a surprised look, and then a smile, pass over my master's face.

'But, mother, take dummy! What ails you at dummy now?'

I saw the poor lady bite her lip, and I am ashamed to confess that I had to bite mine for another reason. Then Ned, to my dismay, turned to me—'Why won't she take dummy now?' he plaintively asked; but at sight of the smile I could no longer restrain, a maudlin grin broke over his face as well, as he got a glimmering of the real state of matters, and I doubt not chuckled with such delight as his clouded reason allowed him over his unhappy parent's annoyance and indignation. At last I got him to lay down the card for which we had been waiting. His uncle never spoke; and the poor weakling, in spite of all his

braggadocio with us women-folk, studiously avoided meeting my master's eye. But all would not do: the mental effort to attend induced drowsiness; and after much endurance of erratic play, the game was abruptly terminated by the Lieutenant putting his king on my ace—sleepily remarking 'that it was a great risk.' My master, at no pains to conceal his disgust, threw down his cards and left the room, and I was only too thankful to follow his example.

How the exasperated parent and her hapless son settled about dummy and other matters, I never heard; but if the card-playing was resumed, I was not again sent for to join in it.

Next morning, however, Ned was down in my room for breakfast as brisk as ever, and not one bit ashamed of the exhibition he had made of himself on the previous evening. Though considerably embarrassed myself, I fancied that, so long as I had no orders to the contrary, I was hardly entitled, from my position in the house, to refuse it to him; but happening in the course of the day to meet Mrs. Ryland on the stair, she opened out on poor innocent me, who was so unwilling a victim to her son's pertinacity.

'I beg you will desist having Mr. Ryland to breakfast in the housekeeper's room, Mrs. Forbes,' she said.

'If you only knew how cordially I detest him coming to my room at all!' I replied; 'and I would be so thankful if you could prevent him.'

'I cannot believe he would do so without encouragement,' she rejoined, with great asperity; 'boy or man, he never before took his meals with the servants.'

To this unkind taunt I did not reply. What I said was, 'If you cannot stop him, I shall speak to the master about it. I feel certain he does not wish me to be annoyed.'

I found on this occasion, and ever afterwards, that even a threatened appeal to my master was always sufficient to bring Mrs. Ryland to reason. Her regard for her brother was mixed up with a reverence and respect that made her very unwilling to lower herself in his eyes by any exhibition of feminine frailty; and feeling, as she could not help doing, that her behaviour towards me was unjustifiable, her chief care was that no indication of it should reach his ears, and that she might pursue her petty cruelties unchallenged. I partly excused her, on the general ground of the bitterness too often felt against even innocent supplanters; for I think, on the whole, she was a warm-hearted if selfish woman, and, while coldly indifferent to all without the pale of kinship, she was only truly unkind to such as had the misfortune to cross her wishes.

So at this time there was no more of it; but what she had said did not predispose me for the enjoyment of Mr. Ryland's company, which every day he seemed more and more determined to thrust upon me.

They who ought to know tell us that it is the last straw that breaks the camel's back ; and when, about a couple of weeks after the young man's arrival at Hallyards, our housemaid Jane smirkingly asked me if she would come to my room and lay breakfast for Mr. Ryland and me, my vertebral arrangement fairly broke down ; and as soon as I could be spared from household duties, I ran over to Mrs. Scott to ask her if she could put me on some plan of ridding myself of this incorrigible youth.

I was convinced his mother had already been trying her hand on him, for he seemed more set against her than ever, and was expressing himself in no measured terms about old women in general, which I knew meant her in particular. As for hint or order of mine, he was like a deaf adder ; and I felt very reluctant to appeal to his uncle.

'Jist leave him alone, hinny,' said the foreman's wife, who had developed quite a maternal interest in me, when I had explained my trouble to her. 'He's no' that ill a lad, Maister Ned ; an' what for need ye be pittin' melder by yer ain mill ?'

'Never speak of that again, Mrs. Scott,' I said, for I could not pretend to misunderstand her. 'When I want grist for my mill, it will be another kind of grain than this tippling sailor ! But do you think I should speak to the master, or just let things be ?'

'Let them be, I wad say,' replied she, seemingly rather astonished that I did not jump at this

opportunity of bettering my fortunes. ‘Deed, tae tell ye the raal honest truth,’ she went on, ‘me an’ the bairns’ faither war jist sayin’, that gin the auld mistress cud be pacified, you an’ Maister Ned micht mak’ a match o’t. He’s no’ that ill on the drink, an’ micht wear steedier wi’ time, an’ a decent woman tae guide him. Year’s bairns too, as ye may say, an’ ilka thing shootable; an’ the maister, I’se warrant, wad mak’ nae grit objections.’

This was intolerable, and mortified me deeply. To think that I was to take this youth in hand, and try to mould his character, under the risk of it either improving or deteriorating, as the case might be; and after all, the best that could be promised me on the part of Ned’s friends was, that his mother might possibly be pacified, and his uncle make no great objections!

How my heart did throb and burn at this estimate of my prospects and aspirations! How little good Mrs. Scott guessed of what was hidden away down in its innermost core, that would always keep me from bestowing my love unworthily, or being satisfied with anything short of the best in exchange for that of which she judged so poorly! Even that such a step should be recommended to me was almost more than I could bear; but, after some trouble, I got my humble friend to understand my feelings, though I could not win her over to sympathize with them.

‘Then, my woman, I think ye’re wrang,’ she

said ; 'men are no' jist like muggarts on a lea-field, springin' up at ilka han' ; an' mony a braw quean has missed her market afore noo, wi' settin' up her back at what was gaun, an' haein' tae tak' less than market-rate at last.'

'Then let her miss it—and better for her too !' I rejoined. 'Marriage may be a lottery at the best ; but when women wed with drink and weakness, with their eyes open, they're cheap of all they get, I think.'

'Atweel, it's no' that mickle o' a lot for some o' them ; but than, ye see, they hae aye gotten a man tae theirsels, and that counts for something,' said this advocate for married bliss under somewhat impossible conditions.

'I doubt it would not have counted for much with you, Mrs. Scott,' I said, 'if you had fallen on Margaret Bell's lot, for instance.'

Jamie Bell was our cattleman, and, having through drink sunk lower than the brutes he tended, would have been turned from about the place long ago, but that our master had not the heart to throw the poor struggling wife and the helpless children out of house and home.

'Dear sakes, no !' ejaculated Mrs. Scott in fervent tones ; 'I wad hae broken the besom-shank oot ower the drucken loon's¹ back or noo ! Na, na,' she added reflectively, 'I cudna hae putten up wi' him as Marget has dune, an' foughten on wi' poor-tith² and meesery for ever. Weel, ye're aiblins

¹ An idle fellow.

² Poverty.

richt, after a'; Marget wad hae been a hantle¹ better her lane, than haein' tae wark for man an' weans too—an' no' the life o' a dug wi' him whan a's dune.'

I had the best of the argument, but I missed the good advice I sought. I expected Mrs. Scott would have entered more heartily into my views, now that I had got her this length; but I found that, though she could grasp an illustration fast enough, she could not rise to the consideration of abstract principles. And besides, she had too much of the fine feeling our French neighbours call *esprit de corps* to believe, or at least to admit, that any one could be lowered socially or otherwise by entering the family she and her goodman had lived under so long. And I admired her, in that she threw the mantle of her loyalty over even the least worthy member of her master's household. Simple faith is better than strong perceptions, if they are only used to mark the defects in our brother's character, instead of considering the deeper evils of our own: we can seldom do good by fathoming the one; but by gauging the other, we have at least the chance of coming on some fulsome excrescence, and setting ourselves to its uprooting.

¹ A good deal.





CHAPTER VIII.

LEFT IN CHARGE.

WHEN things are at the worst they mend, says the old 'saw ;' and so it was in my experience : for just when this small *imbroglio* was fast becoming unendurable—because I fancied, right or wrong, that even my master's face was turned away from me—Mr. Ryland got his ship ; and, to my great relief, his stay at Hallyards was now numbered, not by days, but by hours.

But the climax that was to mark the turning-point was not yet quite reached. Short as the time was, Ned contrived to plunge us all into further trouble ; and I, who perhaps appeared to onlookers to get the smallest share, was in reality the greatest sufferer, both in the present pain of a disagreeable circumstance, and in the heavy consequences of being misunderstood by him for whose good opinion I would almost have risked my life.

Among the few places at which my master was

really intimate, though he visited less or more with all the neighbouring gentry, was the parish manse ; and it was just beginning to be whispered among the gossips that Mrs. Graham, the minister's wife, had pitched upon the wealthy widower as a suitable match for her eldest daughter. Grace Graham had already attained the very marriageable age of twenty-five, and, having been brought up to consider wedlock the chief end of life, was naturally feeling that she was involuntarily misusing, if not altogether abusing, her time, and that what she had been so long in pursuit of was like the mirage in the thirsty desert—the more she tried to come up with it, the faster it receded before her.

True, there was twenty years of difference between her age and Mr. Dale's ; but what was that, weighed against the solid advantages of an establishment like his ? And as she was a good-looking girl, of the florid, fair, sleepy-eyed type, just one to attract a man somewhat past his meridian and fancying himself done with youthful follies, there seemed no reasonable ground to doubt that the scheme might be carried out to the satisfaction of both mother and daughter, provided the other party interested could be brought to be of their mind.

That the girl was deeply in love with Mr. Dale's person, or his property, there was no doubt ; but by all that I could see, she had needlessly bared her bosom to the assaults of the archer-god, whose darts appeared to be more of her own seeking than of my master's sending,—likely, too, to be

but poisoned arrows, rankling in the self-inflicted wounds of an unrequited love.

Mrs. Ryland and Mrs. Graham, though wide as the poles asunder in all their tastes and habits, had been fraternizing in a wonderful way since the former lady's advent among us; and as I knew from Ned—who never concealed his mother's weaknesses—that she fully intended the young man to be his uncle's heir, I was the more surprised that she so meekly played into the hands of the other schemer, who certainly had the start of her, in that the raw material on which she had to work was so much more ductile and flexible.

But when I came to understand things more fully, I found it was the old story of a wheel within a wheel. Mrs. Graham had a niece as well as a daughter—a lively, amiable girl, some few years younger than her cousin—an heiress already, as she was an orphan, and in every respect a most suitable person for Ned, and he for her, had his inner life borne out the promise of his outer man, or his mental bias been commensurate with his social status.

For Ned had fair prospects. His father, like himself, had been in the navy, and his grandfather had died an admiral; and I had reason to know that that high position was the least the mother looked for, for her son. But at present, to see him married, or at least engaged, to Alice Burnley, was her chief ambition; and I only hoped the young man might not spoil the game by introduc-

ing at some inopportune moment an undreamt-of dummy.

This love-affair of the Lieutenant's—or rather, of his mother's for him—had been in a much more prosperous state at one time than it was now; and it was more to recover lost ground than to inaugurate a new departure that Mrs. Ryland, in the face of daily increasing difficulties, strove to keep her little scheme afloat. But this I learned later on; for Ned, who could be close enough when it suited him, merely gave me to understand that his mother was trying to drag him into a distasteful entanglement.

With all this machinery in motion, and so many wily engineers to drive it, it did not surprise me to learn that my up-stairs party were all to dine and spend the last night, before Ned Ryland left us, at the manse; but it was rather startling to me to find, on ascending to the drawing-room late in the afternoon of that day, him, who was to have been the guest of the evening, evidently far gone in liquor, and his mother half wild with consternation and dismay.

My first thought was, where he could possibly have found the requisite to put himself into such a state at that hour of the day. There had been nothing stronger than water at luncheon,—for the house of late had been virtually teetotal for his sake; and he had not been from about the place, so far as I knew. I felt somewhat afraid that Mrs. Ryland, with her usual unjustness, might tax

me with connivance ; but I was spared this humiliation, as it did not appear to strike her to add this further suspicion to others little less damaging, with which she had so freely charged me. On the contrary, she seemed rather inclined to lean on me ; and as this was the first time she had allowed herself even to appear aware of her son's failing in my presence, I knew that the iron had entered into her soul, and that the wounded spirit could no longer keep silence.

‘What is to be done with him, Mrs. Forbes ? You see what a state he is in ; and the afternoon so far gone !’

‘I’m puffuctly well, mother,’ chimed in Ned, avoiding my eye, and speaking very thick,—‘puffuctly well ! Don’t thr-ruble ‘bout it ! What dosh a fellah care, when he’s puffuctly well ?’

‘Unhappy, misguided boy !’ sighed his mother, while the tears she was too proud to shed suffused her eyes ; and in spite of all her gratuitous insults to me, I felt that, had she wept, I could have wept with her—not on account of the too probable miscarrying of her present scheme, but for the pitiful thought that the foolish youth was throwing both worlds at his feet, and that all the mother’s hopes for her only son were more than likely to be blasted by his own unutterable and senseless folly.

While Mrs. Ryland and I conversed on the domestic matter that had brought me to the drawing-room,—for the other subject, though wet enough in Ned’s hands, soon became a very dry one

in ours,—the young man had thrown himself on the couch from which his mother had risen to speak to me, and was now apparently asleep—at least his eyes were shut, and he was snoring, with what struck me at the time as rather an audible voice.

For Ned in one sense bore out, and in another gave the lie to, the poet's misguiding words. With him drink neither 'kindled wut' nor 'waukened lair,' but it brought out very markedly a certain low cunning that was inherent in his nature, and which either developed itself more prominently under the influence of liquor, or perhaps he simply lost the power of dissembling at these times, and so betrayed his real character.

'You see, we ought to start in an hour,' said Mrs. Ryland, taking out her watch, and recurring to the manse dinner-party. 'The carriage was to come for us at half-past five.'

When Mrs. Ryland went out of an evening, she always engaged a carriage from Dunsford. My master had laid down his own carriage after his wife's death—that is to say, it was standing in the coach-house with the wheels off, for he never required it for himself; and though no miser where outlay was necessary, he did not believe in augmenting the revenue by paying taxes for what he did not use.

Mrs. Ryland spoke very excitedly: a crimson spot burned on each cheek; she had pushed her cap back in her perplexity, and altogether looked very flushed and uncomfortable.

Her voice seemed to have an arousing effect on Ned; for, opening his eyes as suddenly as he had closed them, and staggering to his feet, he took his poor mother's face between his hands. 'Mother, mother, how hot you look!' he said. 'Well, well, you do look hot; and it's not a warm night either.' Then, hearing his uncle's step on the stairs, he steadied himself by the help of chairs and tables, and so got out of the room and through the hall just in time to miss meeting him.

'I think there is a little improvement,' said the poor woman, not very much improved herself by her son's not too gentle touches, 'but it would be madness taking him out to dinner as he is. Could you take charge of him, my dear?' she asked, driven by her necessities to an access of tenderness that I estimated at its true worth. 'Just get him to sleep for a couple of hours, and then give him some tea; and, if he seems quite himself, James could drive him down to the manse to say good-bye to his friends, and he could return with us.'

I wondered if Mrs. Ryland really fancied her son in a state of infancy still, or what kind of process she meant me to put him through to induce the sleep that was to make him himself again. From experience, I knew that unless drowsiness over-powered him, there was small chance of my being able to do so; and, as he had already taken a short nap, it was highly improbable that he would sink so soon again into the arms of Morpheus. But having got my commission, I undertook it pro-

visionally, and went down-stairs firmly determined to keep a sharp eye on my charge, and, if possible, carry out his mother's wishes.

As I more than half expected, Ned was sitting in my easy-chair when I re-entered my room. He had been making more use of it than myself of late; but on that evening I felt particularly chagrined to think that, but for his weak-minded folly, I might have had such a comfortable time of it, with my chair, and my fire, and my book—three concomitants of happiness sufficient to make an earthly paradise to any one fortunate enough to command them.

What a contemptible spectacle he presented! His hair had fallen over his brows; his eyes were half closed; his very attitude bespoke helplessness and degradation, and I was just turning away in strong disgust, when he opened one eye and gave me such a drunken leer, that I felt relieved to think the servants were within call, and that I could have help in a minute if my patient got either obstreperous or demonstrative!

His mother came down, before she started, to make observations, both ocular and verbal; but Ned did not look promising, and her only hope seemed to lie in my ability and willingness to work something little short of a miracle in her behalf.

It was pitiful to see how she scanned my face, to read if I would really stand by her; and I could not help thinking how much wiser she had been to have kept up at least a show of civility to me from

the first. We little know to what straits we may be driven, or to whom we may be reduced to turn for aid. Only for a friend a man will show himself friendly. Why, then, need our churlishness find us in enemies ready-made to our hands?

Not that I at all intended to fail Mrs. Ryland at this crisis. No! she was as safe of my hearty co-operation as if she had been my dearest friend—but it was because her desires happened to accord with mine. Had they been in opposition, I do not know that I would have held myself obliged to go out of my way to serve her.





CHAPTER IX.

WANTED—A MERMAID !

FWE had any substantial hopes from the sobering influences of tea and sleep, we were destined to be disappointed.

In the first place, the carriage had no sooner driven from the door, than Ned sat up and began to talk, not in a drowsy or drunken tone, but in a rollicking, easy way, that quite precluded the idea that he had really been as bad as he appeared ; and now that he had been at all this pains to simulate what was too often a painful reality, farewell to my hopes of getting rid of him later in the evening.

‘Now get us some prog, Miss Forbes—something spicy and relishing,’—he was as childishly fond of good living as he was weakly addicted to hard drinking,—‘and we’ll sail up to the wind, and lay to, and make a night of it.’

‘You’ve got to go down to the manse, you know,

Mr. Ryland. James has orders to drive you over about eight o'clock.'

'It's an invention of the enemy,' he replied; 'I know Old Nick's sailing orders when I see them.'

'You can ask James if he got them in that quarter. I heard your uncle tell him, last thing, to be ready when you wished to start.'

'Oh, if my uncle's in it, I'll have to put it on a decent footing; so you'll just give me a stiffish can of grog about the time they come back, and when he sees me, he'll be quite pleased I did not go down to disgrace the family.'

'You'll not get any help from me to put things on that footing,'—for I feared this was just the beginning of a begging and praying for spirits that would go on all the evening; 'and besides, what will Miss Alice Burnley think if you don't go to bid her farewell?'

'Alice Burnley be blowed! They won't get me to cruise in these waters. My uncle may, if he chooses; but they say he's sweet on the other one, and Mother Graham will want to launch her own outrigger first.'

'But you'll go down, Mr. Ryland, and say good-bye? It will only be common civility, and Miss Burnley is too sweet and good a girl for any man to slight.'

For I thought from what I had seen that she was really fond of Ned; and if there was a chance of any one doing him good, it would be Alice, with her gentle, firm ways, and her patient, loving heart.

The two girls, Grace Graham and Alice Burnley, often came to Hallyards. My old friend, Mr. Jamieson, had spoken of me at the manse as a special favourite of his, and had brought the girls himself the first time they came to visit me. After that they did not stand on any ceremony about my going to them,—a kind of tacit understanding existing that my time was hardly at my own disposal; and thus we bridged the great gulf that, Miss Graham never seemed to forget, lay between them and me. Perhaps it was a sense of this that predisposed me to notice that she was always on the outlook to fall in with my master; while gentle, loving Alice would come to my room, and throw her arms round me, and never seem to know or care that I was working for my bread, and that theirs was sure.

So I felt that I owed Alice a good turn, and if I could, I would send her a lover. All the same, I had sore misgivings about it; but at least it would please her, I knew, to see Ned; and I urged him, by all the arguments I could muster, to go to the manse, if only for a couple of hours, and come home with his mother and uncle.

‘I wouldn’t give a marline-spike for the whole ship’s crew of them,’ he replied irreverently. ‘No, no; I’ve swung my hammock, and I’ll not turn out this watch. “For I’m mar-ri-ed to a mer-mi-ad at the bottom of the sea,”’ he sang; ‘and if you’ll just seat yourself on that rock, Miss Forbes,’ pointing to a chair, ‘and get a comb in your hand,

and let down your hair, you'll make the tautest little mermaid ever was seen.' And Ned got up to transform me with his own hands into a sea-nymph.

'Mr. Ryland,' I said, with all the dignity I could command, 'sit down, and don't make a fool of yourself.'

'Oh, well, I won't if you don't like it,'—as if he had been going on all along to please me. 'I'll do everything you bid me but leave you; for, you see,' he continued, in the earnest, half-solemn way he had at times,—'you see you've made an impression, and when once an impression is made on me it never wears out. A fellow cannot help his impressions—can he?'

'I should say that if he were much of a man, and had any proper spirit, he would resist impressions about people who could not appreciate them.'

'Ah, that's your way of saying "no" to a fellow, is it? But you're rather premature, Miss Forbes, let me tell you. You see, you've only made an impression so far, and though it mayn't ever wear out, it mayn't ever wear in. A dent on a ship's coppers isn't like a hole right through, you know—she may be all right in her inner skin, and perfectly water-tight and seaworthy; and this 'ere hulk isn't much damaged, so to say,—only a dent from a certain little dart, glancing off the armour above the water-line.'

'Oh, Mr. Ryland,' I sighed, 'if you would only

go and get a deeper dent elsewhere, and leave me in peace!' For this senseless talk had been going on with less or more of intermission all the evening, and it was getting late, and I was tired with the fruitless struggle, and wearied and disengaged by my non-success. 'Our colliding at all,' I continued, 'was purely accidental, so far as I am concerned; and if there is so little damage done, you could soon sheer off on a new tack.' I had been so much with Ned lately, or he with me rather, that I was becoming quite nautical myself in my figures of speech.

'Hauling down my flag, you mean, and sailing under false colours! No; I may be a low skipper, but I ain't pirate enough for that. Look here now! I'm not going to ask you to sign the ship's papers this time, but you'll keep me on your weather-bow, and if no bigger craft turns up for consort, you'll give me a sailor lad's welcome when I next come ashore.'

'I know nothing about sailor lads, and crafts, and consorts,' I said unthinkingly, for I half fancied that I heard the sound of carriage-wheels on the gravel; and though I had been doing nothing wrong, I felt that Ned was compromising me dreadfully by not going to the manse; and if his mother found him sitting in my room, and almost quite sober, she would not be in a temper to listen to any explanations.

So, with my ears strained to catch the slightest sound, I answered Ned Ryland at random, that I

knew nothing about the special ~~welcomes~~ given to sailor lads when they came ashore.

‘Why, don’t you know how Black-eyed Susan greets her sailor lad?’ he said, with a laugh. ‘Like this;’ and before I knew what he was about, he threw his arms round me and gave me a hearty smack, that had more of mischief and triumph in it than any deeper feeling, as I knew.

Before I could speak or shake myself free, the door opened, and Mrs. Ryland and—what vexed me even more—my master’s face, just showing above her shoulders, appeared on the scene.

‘So this is the way you keep faith with your employer!’ said Ned’s mother, with a scathing look at me. ‘This is your immaculate housekeeper, brother Matthew,’ turning to Mr. Dale with an ironical little curtsey, that at any other time would have been ludicrous, with its semi-tragic air. ‘This is the young person who looks so strictly after your servants, and takes such liberties herself!’

‘Oh, sir, hear me!’ I broke in. ‘Will you believe me, or will you listen to Mr. Ryland, for he cannot refuse to tell you how I have tried to get him to attend to his mother’s wishes?’

‘Ha, ha! more deceit and lies!’ shrieked the excited woman, now thoroughly lost to all the restraints of politeness or decorum.

‘Miss Forbes,’ said my master, in a calm tone that had a curious effect after Mrs. Ryland’s intemperate words, ‘I do not in the least doubt you—and you must excuse my sister, who is so greatly

tried by an undutiful son; but—' and he paused as if uncertain how to proceed, then added suddenly, 'Settle it among yourselves; and I hope, Ned, you'll treat the young lady better than you do your mother.'

'Oh, master!' I cried, and I was about to tell him that Ned's intentions as respected myself would not affect me one way or another, when Mrs. Ryland, rendered still more frantic by what Mr. Dale seemed to imply, broke out in so vehement and incoherent a style that he fled in dismay; and as I saw my last chance vanish of explaining to him how matters really stood, I dropped into a chair and burst into tears.

At sight of his uncle's back and my distress, Ned's courage, which had rather flagged, came back to him. 'Avast there, mother!' he said. 'I know by this time how little you think of me, and I'm afraid Miss Forbes has no better opinion of me. I didn't exactly offer to marry her to-night, but I said as much as that I might do so some day, and she just as good as refused to have anything to do with me.'

'Shameless fellow!' she exclaimed; 'as if drink were not bad enough, but you must fall into low company as well,—sitting with your uncle's servants when you might have been enjoying the society of your equals, and spending a pleasant evening at the manse.'

'Then, hang it if I prefer sitting with the servants, since you choose to call it so! though Miss Forbes

is no more a servant than I am. I think you might have the good sense to see that you are taking the wrong way to wear ship.'

And Mrs. Ryland seemed suddenly to come to the same conclusion herself, for she collapsed all at once, and, taking Master Ned in tow, she sailed out of the room without another word.

But I could not get over my distress and vexation so easily—not that I cared one whit about Ned Ryland or his mother; but that my master should believe that a reciprocal feeling had sprung up between his nephew and me was a misfortune on which I never calculated, and I knew I would have as little chance of undceiving him as if he were the king upon the throne and I a prisoner in the dungeon.

During the following forenoon Mr. Ryland took his departure; and his mother's vigilance being redoubled, and having for decency's sake to take breakfast in the dining-room, I began to fear that he would not come down-stairs to say good-bye.

Though I had already suffered much, and even then foresaw that I had not yet fathomed all the trouble that would befall me on his account, I could not cherish any lasting anger towards the poor foolish lad. Even when a preference is damaging, we cannot help feeling some gratitude and a measure of respect for those who, however unworthy in themselves, have discovered something lovable in us, and are slow to believe that they can be wholly bad who have discrimination to perceive the

good with which we are ever ready to credit ourselves.

So I was best pleased that Ned managed to give his mother the slip just before starting, and came into my room like a whirlwind, to say farewell and give me another smack, which I did not forbid him this time, poor boy ! for, besides the dangers of the deep, he was to brave the perils of war ; and in the uncertainty of ever seeing him again, I could not refuse him so small a parting gift.

‘Now you’ll keep me on your weather-bow,’ he said, as confidently as if I had already agreed to do so. ‘It’s not much to ask, but I won’t go in for more just now ; and if my mother gives you any of her yarns again, just refer her to my uncle,—that will throw her on her beam-ends, and then you can leave her to right herself.’

I could only shake my head at his irreverence, and laugh at his audacity. What cared poor thoughtless Ned for either my laughing or my crying ? But we must go on casting our pearls to the swine, well knowing that they will trample them under foot ; so I promised I would watch his career with the deepest interest, and I hoped he would come back a great man, and marry Miss Alice Burnley. But his mother’s voice being heard in dangerous proximity, he had not time for more than a grimace expressive of strong dissent, as he hurried up-stairs in astonishingly good spirits.

Mrs. Ryland contrived to get him under way

half an hour earlier, that he might take in the manse on his way to Dunsford ; but whether or not he asked any of them there to keep him on their weather-bow, as he called it, was more than doubtful.





CHAPTER X.

M Y P E N N Y-F E E.

GRACE GRAHAM and Alice Burnley came over to Hallyards that same afternoon—the former, of course, to visit Mrs. Ryland ; and I had an intuitive feeling that her ears would be regaled with an account of my misdoings. Besides the antipathy Miss Graham seemed to feel for me, she was not quite the girl to espouse the cause of the friendless, and I knew I would be arraigned at the bar of this self-constituted tribunal without benefit of counsel ; but that was a light matter in comparison with other considerations. If only my master did not condemn or misinterpret my motives, the verdict of others could hardly affect me, for I did not believe that either of the two had power to influence him against his better judgment.

Alice, as usual, came straight to my room, looking pale and dejected.

‘Oh, Miss Forbes, I am so sad about Ned !’ she said ; ‘I am afraid he is falling into wretched habits,

and his mother understands him so little ; indeed, if it were not for his uncle, I believe he would go to the bad altogether.'

'I hope the voyage may do him good, and that he'll come back all right,' I said cheerfully, for I did not like to see Alice so low about him, knowing how little he cared for her.

'Then he is going so far away too, and we may never see him again. Do you think, Miss Forbes, that the Cape is really a dangerous climate? Grace thinks that Ned, being so stout and fond of stimulants, will never stand the heat.'

'I fear your cousin is a Job's comforter, Miss Burnley,' I replied ; 'Mr. Ryland seems to me to have a first-rate constitution, and to be equally fit for the North Pole or the torrid zone, or any part of the world where there is good anchorage and a fair commissariat.'

Alice opened her large blue eyes rather wider than usual, and regarded me wistfully. This bantering tone of mine was new to her ; but she would have stared harder still had I told her of all the Lieutenant's ongoings with me, and what a humbug I thought him. 'At all events,' I added, 'they whom sailors leave behind them have little need to foredate their woe, or perplex themselves about a day they may never see.'

'That is true for us all, Miss Forbes,' she rejoined, 'but especially true for those who have friends at sea. Well, we must just trust,'—and she threw her arms round me, and hid her face on my shoulder.

while she whispered rather to herself than me,—‘trust and pray that He who holds the waters in the hollow of His hand will bring our sailor to the haven where he would be.’

‘I was not to stay long, Miss Forbes,’ Alice said presently; ‘Grace is in a hurry to-day, it seems, and Mrs. Ryland is going to walk back with us.’

And when, a few minutes later, I saw my master escorting Miss Graham down the avenue, with Mrs. Ryland and Alice following, it struck a chill to my heart—unwarrantable perhaps, but we mercurial folks cannot resist outside influences; and I laid my aching head (for I think the pain strikes up) on the back of my friendly chair, and watered the prospective grave of my buried hopes with a few scalding tears.

Mrs. Ryland did not seem to be in any hurry to change her quarters, even after her son left Hall-yards; and as I felt much in need of change of air and scene,—for the petty persecutions I had endured had taken no little out of me,—I summoned courage to ask my master if I could be spared for a week to run over to Blackadder, and look up Janet and other old friends there.

‘I think I can get away even though Mrs. Ryland is here,’ I explained; ‘I can trust to the servants to attend to her wants and make her comfortable, and also keep the ordinary work of the house going on as usual.’ For I had engaged all the maids to ‘stay on’ for the ensuing half-year, and given them distinctly to understand that, so

long as they did their work and obeyed orders, they might count on me as a friend ; and that I knew I was but carrying out the master's views in trying to make Hallyards, not a house of bondage, but a pleasant home to them ; that favour would reward well-doing, but that indolence and insubordination would have to be carried elsewhere.

So they had all, even cook, responded to the appeal ; and I was cheered to see that I had touched the proper chord, and rather disposed, I fear, to plume myself overmuch on my good management—more particularly when my master complimented me on it, and said that better order had never been seen about the place. He would be happy, he added, to think that I was to have a little time to myself,—a couple of weeks or more, if I cared to take them,—for though all seemed to go on like clockwork, which was the best of it, he suspected I had had my own troubles in getting the household into so good a state and keeping them up to it.

All this was highly flattering, and bespoke some observation and reflection on my master's part ; for I fancied then, and am fully convinced now, that average men folks regard the daily routine of domestic life as an amusement got up to keep females from wearying, and that such extra occasions as washing-days and the like are merely indulged in as a pleasant variety, equally without necessity or result.

So I felt that I served one who could appreciate

my humble efforts; and, but for a matter of urgent importance, I should have been content. The want of filthy lucre was again oppressing me; and so far as my wages were concerned, I had not yet seen the colour of my master's money. I could not go back to old Janet as poor as when I left her; and my wardrobe, never very ample, was becoming sadly dilapidated, and worn-out fabrics and out-of-date fashions were staring me in the face and loudly demanding redress.

In looking back on life, I see more and more that we are often perplexing ourselves in vain—fighting with shadows, fleeing before visions, frightened for a day all the more terrible because unseen. To how few of us is it given to say, in the hot and impatient days of youth, 'In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength'!

Mr. Dale was not one to overlook any detail of money matters, however trifling; and, knowing this, I should not have allowed myself one doubting thought, or accredited him, even in imagination, with an inconsiderateness he had never shown.

'You will be back in time to settle the quarter's bills,' he observed; 'but how will you arrange about the pass-books?'

My master had grasped the identical question which, though a trivial thing in itself, was yet the little pivot on which the household discomfort was to turn; but nevertheless he allowed me to stumble on in blind security, rather than spoil the plans I had innocently laid for much future mischief.

'I think of leaving the books with the servants, and let them order what is wanted,' I said. 'They cannot go far wrong in the time; and if they do make a slight error, it will be one of judgment only, as I have found them quite trustworthy and reliable; and I will give Jessie instructions about keeping an account of all the dairy produce she sells.'

For, finding poor 'derry' very ill educated, and yet an interesting, clever girl, I had been teaching her the three 'R's,' and also, by a side wind, trying to instil into her mind some notions of domestic economy; and, incited by the desire of making herself more worthy of Tom, she had taken to her tasks with great eagerness, and never would have dreamt now of not 'fashin' her thumb,' which was her own very graphic description of her state of mind when I first came to live at Hallyards.

'Just so,' said Mr. Dale, when I had unfolded my little scheme to him,—'just so;' and he gave his lips a smack, expressive, as I thought, of his approbation, while all the time, I daresay, he was highly tickled at my simplicity. 'Just so; and I expect, with Mrs. Ryland's help, we shall get on like blazes;' and, though he gave his shoulders a most decided shrug, I never saw he was laughing at me.

'You'll want some cash, Miss Forbes,' he said next. 'Oh, by the way, I never heard how the place suited you. But I suppose you will consider yourself engaged for the twelve months, at any rate.'

‘The place suits me excellently well, sir,’ I replied; ‘and so long as I am required, I think there will be no break on my side.’ But even as I spoke, I thought with dismay of that buxom, blooming girl who was said to be so ready to supplant me, invested with a position and a name, that even in my most sanguine moments I hardly dared to hope for.

‘And what is the damage, then?’ abruptly asked my master; and I started from my reverie, for, in the light of my fears, the words bore a strange significance. It seemed as if the loss of hearth and home were about to be appraised, and the money handed over for what, to me, was more than money’s worth.

‘The damage, sir?’ I echoed, and I daresay I looked a little dazed, for the smile with which he had been regarding me deepened. ‘Ah, well, to be sure,’ I added, bethinking myself, ‘there was no sum named at the time you engaged me, but I have a very comfortable home, and whatever you think reasonable will be sure to please me.’

For I had that confidence in the justice of my master’s dealings, that I believed he would give me what he thought an equivalent for my services, and more I did not want.

‘From what I can learn, I suppose this will be about the correct thing half-yearly;’ and he handed me a bunch of bank-notes, and then stood looking to see how I received them. Twenty-five of them for the half-year, and everything found, as the

servants say. It seemed far too much for anything I had done to earn it ; and, instead of thanking my employer, as I should have done, I stood holding the money irresolutely in my hand—glad enough to get it, but hardly feeling as if it were honestly mine.

‘Perhaps you think it small,’ he said kindly ; ‘but I find my neighbour, Sir John, just gives seventy pounds a year to his housekeeper, and he has twice as many people to look after as I have.’

‘Oh, sir, it’s not that,’ I said, finding my voice at last ; ‘my fear is that it is far too much ; and anything I do seems so trifling compared with such a large sum.’

‘Oh, that’s the mistake, is it ? Ah, well, we must try to adjust it another time. When do you propose to start on your travels ?’

‘I was thinking, on Saturday evening, sir. I will see everything put forward for Sunday’ (for we always arranged to have a minimum of cooking on the Lord’s Day, and it took us all our time on the Saturdays to compass the work of two days in one), ‘and then I will catch the last train for Blackadder.’

‘Oh, very well. Then I may not see you again before you leave, at least not to speak to in a quiet way, so good-bye for the present ;’ and he, for the first time since I entered his service, offered me his hand.

How mine trembled as I took it ! and how I longed to throw myself bodily into his arms for

one brief happy moment, even though, in the next, I might have to rush from his presence for ever!

It is well for us that the restraints of society keep our impulses within due bounds, and guard us against exhibitions that might imperil our self-respect, or raise the blush of unavailing contrition for actions innocent and artless in themselves, but bearing an undesirable resemblance to things that are neither.





CHAPTER XI.

A FRIENDLY SECTARY.



OLD Nurse Janet received me with open arms, and could not make enough of her 'bairn,' as she delighted to call me still. After the struggles I had come through, first with the servants, and then with the Rylands, it was very sweet and pleasant to sit at my ease in Janet's parlour and pour forth all my troubles into her sympathizing ear, and be petted and pitied to my heart's content.

Then there was my penny-fee to exhibit and discuss, and partial Janet would not let it stand on ground that it had missed the honour of being 'sair won,' though she confessed in the same breath that Mr. Dale had been 'raal free wi' the bawbees.¹

After a rest of a few days, I proposed that she and I should take a trip into Edinburgh, where two of my brothers were earning their livelihood in shops, and one—the Benjamin of the family—was fighting his way, through poverty and privation, to an education that would fit him for the profession

¹ Literally coppers—often used to express money.

in which my father had struggled with the same adverse conditions all his life.

I confess I sometimes shuddered when I thought of James, my favourite brother, entering on so unremunerative a career as that in which my father had spent himself,—when, in the heyday of youth and health, there was barely the wherewithal to enjoy it ; and, in the winter of a sickly old age, means were often wanting to procure the necessary comforts it was so hard at such a time to want ; while his prime was spent in one prolonged struggle to meet daily expenses out of an overweighted income, that might have borne the strain of fustian and a two-roomed house, but melted visibly away before the exactions of a black coat and a couple of parlours !

And yet I could not help being proud of the hero in my brother—my boy, as I called him—when I thought of the self-denial of his present lot, and the unmercenary spirit in which he elected to follow in his father's footsteps ; and I often forecast to myself, in glowing colours, the happy day when his sweet young voice would bear to the sky the supplications of an assembly of the saints on earth.

But I was a prosperous woman now, and I had become an ambitious one as well. If Mr. Dale did not marry, I was tolerably secure of a home, and fifty pounds to the good ; and I had determined, in my own mind, that James should come out for the Established Church—and the lad himself had agreed to abide by my decision in the matter.. All

the same, it went without saying that we would meet with strong opposition from Janet, who was of the real old Burgher blood, and hardly looked upon us Relief folks as altogether sound in the faith, far less the uncovenanted Kirk of Scotland ; but we trusted that her strong affection for the children of her beloved mistress (of my father she never made any account, either living or dead) would not only bear the strain of this departure from the Perpetual testimony, but even lead her to accord an unwilling acquiescence ; and more than that, James and I, in our wild young days, never waited for.

How pleased I was to see him again, my bonnie brown-eyed laddie ! with his soft, pale face and his grand forehead, on which the auburn curls lay like gleams of sunshine. I fear there was a strong admixture of Pharisaical pride in the contrast I was often mentally drawing between him and Ned Ryland ; the one manfully struggling with adversity, and striving to be a credit and an honour to his family—the other sinking helplessly in the slough of his animal propensities, and likely to bring his friends only sorrow and disgrace.

James, with his high, independent spirit, was at first somewhat doubtful about becoming a pensioner on my bounty, as the foolish boy called it; but I pointed out to him that it might be a loan in the meantime, and then he gladly accepted the timely aid.

‘ An’ aboot the Kirk, Jeems ! ’ struck in Janet ; ‘ are ye clear on that head ? Hae ye nae qua’ms o’ conscience anent changin’ yer belief ? ’

‘I’ll no’ be changing my belief, Janet,’ he replied. ‘The fundamentals are all the same ; it’s only the Church government that differs a wee.’

‘Sirs, laddie ! ca’ ye that a slicht thing ? Is’t noucht, think ye, tae turn yer back on a burning an’ a shining licht, for that auld misleerit¹ dingle-dousy² the Esteeblishment, whaur they worship their Maker by Ac’ o’ Parliament an’ mony siclike ferlies³ regaardless o’ the saunts wha sealed their testimony wi’ their precious blude ?’

The early Christians who fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, and those later martyrs who, at the Reformation, cheerfully gave up their lives unto the death in the struggle with Rome, were little thought of by Janet in comparison with the heroes of the Covenant, who in the battle with Prelacy became the victims of atrocities perpetrated in the name of the law, that stained the moors and mountains of Scotland with the blood of the slain.

‘Well, Janet,’ said James, reverting to her taunt against the Establishment, ‘they call it Erastian, this connection between the Church and the State, and many hard names besides ; but ye mind old John Lowrie and Wattie Hinchelwood, wi’ their sour faces, and their big feet, and their lang blue worset stockings, how they used to come to our house and ower-ride my father ! I reckon the State would be a hard taskmaster indeed if its rule was as bad, or half as bad, to thole.’

¹ Ill-taught. ² A small stick lighted at one end.

³ A term of contempt.

'Oh, wheesht, laddie!' supplicated Janet. 'I doot ye're lookin' mair tae the carnals nor tae the inward speerituals. There's nae Kirk can thrive that's hampered wi' ungodly meddling, an' keepit up wi' the wages o' sin—sellin' its glorious birth-right o' freedom for a bowl o' parritch, as gude auld Maister Hastie used tae observe.'

'A mess of pottage, you mean, Janet,' corrected James, laughing.

'I mean what I say, Jeems,' retorted Janet stoutly. 'Maister Hastie was a fine hamely man, an' a meemorable expounder o' the Word. I min' whan he was discoorsing o' Awbraham settin' oot tae offer up his son Isaac; how he tell't us that the decent mon lifted the sneck saftly, an' a snippet oot cannily, for fear o' wakenin' his auld woman Sawrah; an' afterhins, what was tae stap him frae makin' a'thing plain tae kintra¹ folk, that kenned a hantle mair aboot their parritch than—wi' reeverence be it spoken,' put in Janet, feeling she was getting on to ticklish ground—'than ony mixtie-maxtie² o' pottage, that might even hae been some new-fangled³ Frenchie broo, for oucht we ken?'

'But about this selling business, Janet. Speaking o' selling, I think my father took his glorious birth-right o' freedom, as you call it, to a very bad market. I mind o' Tom M'Whiter, the horse-couper, telling him that he wouldn't give one good fair for a whole twelvemonth's stipen's.'

'Atweel, Jeems, we maybe hadna ony great

¹ Country.

² Mixture.

³ New-fashioned.

routh¹ o' this warl's gudes, but we had aye meal an' milk, an' a blessing therewith ; for ye war a' sturdy, stout bairns, an' gin ye had been mair pampered, ye might ablins hae been mair feckless.'²

'It's all very well to look back upon, Nurse,' I said, thinking it time to interpose—for I knew, by habit and repute, that James, with a boy's love of tormenting, often drove the old woman into utterances that her natural goodness of heart all the while condemned,—'it's all very well to look back upon, if one could forget my father's patient martyrdom ; but I wish to see James in some more independent way of winning an honest livelihood. Dissenting ministers, unless they are men of great tact and undoubted talent, are just tools in the hands of their church managers.'

For out of the soreness of my heart, when I thought of those depressing visits of the domineering but conscientious old men that James had so graphically pictured, I had evolved a theory of my own, that such members of the Church militant must be provided with the excitement of a party struggle as a safety-valve, or they will give themselves up to internecine strife. Perhaps my strong affection for my father made me unduly resentful of any interference ; or it might be that the too vivid impressions young minds are apt to take on from very ordinary events had led me to magnify the discomforts of my early lot, and to mourn over it for my dead parents' sake ; but my idea of a

¹ Abundance.

² Weakly.

pastor was, not a helpless victim, bound to the chariot-wheels of the winning side, but a 'shepherd who goeth before his own sheep, and they follow him: for they know his voice.'

So, in spite of Janet's ominous croakings that we were looking too much to the temporals, and that 'nae gude wad come o't,' James entered the Divinity Hall as an 'Auld Kirk' student; and as the brothers could all lodge together, it was a marvellously small sum that Jamie would accept of for present needs. But I left a few pounds in the hands of my eldest brother, with instructions to see that our Benjamin's mess, if not five times as much as theirs, was at least sufficient to nourish and sustain the young body. For I had learned, in my researches into domestic economy, that waste of the system comes from mental as well as manual labour, and I knew how my boy would be giving himself up to the development of his brain-power and the culture of his mind, to the too probable neglect of the framework that held them all together.

That pleasant duty accomplished, I had another in my head which I could hardly decide, within myself, into what category of duty or pleasure to relegate it. At any rate, I was bound to confess myself a weak, vain woman, even when I had argued myself into the belief that a black silk dress, rich but plain, would increase my influence at Hallyards, and be the finishing touch to the respect I was held in there. And, *per contra*, I fear my ears had already caught the rustle of it under Mrs

Ryland's nose, ere ever it had been displayed on the shop-counter, and deftly laid out in glossy folds for my subjugation.

At the same time, I tried to bribe Janet to see it as I did, by an offer of a similar dress for herself; but it would not do.

'Na, na, Miss Annie,' she said; 'get yersel' the braws, gin ye think it's tae gie ye the crown o' the causey¹; but I'm thinkin' I wad jist aye be plain Janet Wilson, whether I was buskit² i' the saatin or the mankie.'³

So this silken copestone 'was laid with shoutings,' for Janet and my few old friends at Blackadder were loud in their praises; and what I could see of myself in Janet's small mirror held out the promise, that if Mrs. Ryland had any true taste in dress, she could not but admire her brother's 'immaculate housekeeper' now.

And, as Ned had confessed when driven, as he too often allowed himself to be, to take refuge in untruth, 'It's nothing telling the first lie, to those that have to be told to back it,' so I found that my piece of extravagance entailed a considerable amount of backing, and that many things that would have passed muster beside a stuff-dress looked out of place beside a silk one. But, after punishing my twenty-five pounds rather roughly, I got myself tolerably ship-shape, and started for Hallyards again, after a holiday of nearly two weeks.

¹ Middle of the street.

² Dressed.

³ A kind of stuff.



CHAPTER XII.

KICKING OVER THE TRACES.

JAMES the groom, with the dog-cart I had almost come to look upon as mine, for no one else ever used it, met me at Dunsford Station once more.

With what different feelings did I spring up beside young James, from that last time when, a few short months ago, I entered with fear and trembling on unknown, and, worse still, on ill-understood duties! Now, with a feeling of elation in my breast, I counted the minutes that must elapse ere I set eyes on the home that had become so dear to me—chiefly, I fear, as the home of him who was every day becoming dangerously nearer to, and hopelessly further from, my foolish heart.

‘And how are you all getting on at home?’ I said to the lad when my parcels were safely stowed inside, and we were fairly on our way.

I knew James was of a sensitive turn, but I was rather surprised to see his face redden at my

simple question, and that he should hesitate to reply.

‘Cook’s been ill,’ at last he stammered out.

‘Dear me! it’s unusual for her to be ailing. Is she better?’ I asked.

‘Oh, she wasn’t long about that!’ replied James, who seemed to have found his voice, now that he had got the ice broken; ‘she tuk bad this day week aboot four o’clock, and she had the doctor at six,—I fetched him myself in this very machine,—and she was up and all right, and sitting at the kitchen fire, before bed-time.’

I saw with surprise that the lad was making great efforts to maintain his gravity as he finished his recital, and that only his habitual respect for me kept him from laughing outright.

‘It’s been sudden in every way,’ I observed.

‘Oh yes, it was real suddent,’ he said, with a snicker; ‘and her boxes is up at Scott’s, and she’s just waiting to give things up to you, as left her in chairege o’ them.’

So this was to be my home-coming again! this the end of my pleasant holiday trip! Gone, like a vision of the night, was all the elated feeling with which I had stepped from the train at the Dunsford Station, and in its place a great sinking of the heart, and an inward sighing and sobbing over the changed aspect before me.

The war-horse ‘paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men;’ but I was not one who could ‘smell

the battle from afar, and say Ha, ha! among the trumpets ;' and yet I had to nerve myself to meet it, for it would not do to show the white feather, or weakly yield up the position I had made for myself at Hallyards.

In the meantime, I asked no further questions ; but from what I had already heard, I had no difficulty in gathering that Mrs. Ryland and my half-tamed cook had been in collision, and that I would be mulcted in the damages of a disorganized household, and all my drilling and disciplining to commence afresh, not to speak of the mortification (and I daresay it was chiefly there the shoe pinched) of finding the good generalship, on which I had been priding myself, hollow and baseless.

As we drew near home, I told James to drop me at the foreman's house.

‘Ye’re walcome as the flowers i’ May,’ said Mrs. Scott, running out to meet me ; ‘an’ lat me tell ye, ye’re no’ a day ower sune.’

‘I understand from James that things are not going on very smoothly.’

‘Smoothly? No! they’re noucht by ordinar’ that way. Ye see, ye warna weel gane till the auld mistress turned a’thing tapsalteerie.¹ First and foremost she gat haud o’ the pass-bukes, an’ quo’ she, “You can apply to me when anything is wanted ;” sae that pat cook clean wud, an’ she was neither tae haud nor to bin’, as the sayin’ is. But she cud only threaten ahint backs, d’ye see, for my

¹ Topsy-turvy.

leddy was auld-farrant eneuch to keep out the gate¹; an' Jane, puir lass, had an unco time o't, trottin', for a' the warl' like a penny-messan,² atween them. But aiblins they micht hae pit in the time, whan, what does the boddie dae, but she maun bid the manse folk a' doun tae their denner. A mair wutless action cudna weel hae been, an' sae little greeance atween her an' cook; but willy-nilly, she sen's Agnes word hoo there wad be a paerty o' sax the neist nicht but wan, and tac provide what was needfu', an' she wad pay the lawin'!"³

'Foolish and obstinate as usual!' I struck in; but Mrs. Scott was too fully primed to stop to listen to my truisms.

'She's a' that, an' mair; but the ither's nae fule, an' she sees her chance, an' she packs James aff tae the toun for fish, an' beef, an' ilka orra thing ye cud mention; an' she garr'd Jessie kill a young turkey an' a pair o' fools—jist a raal handsome denner! An' Jane ran doun this length the nicht afore, "An' I dinna," says she, "onderstan' oor Agnes at a', an' I wiss there's nocht unner't!"'

'What could be under it?' I asked in dismay, for I guessed that all this must be the prelude to some dreadful catastrophe.

'No' tae stop ye,' chimed in Mrs. Scott, whom a stampede of wild cattle would hardly have stopped herself—'the neist day, that's the paerty day, cook flees about a' the mornin', an' ne'er spak' a word tae wan; but she gets the kitchen denner by, an'

¹ Out of the way.

² A small dog.

³ Bill, expense.

about mid-afternoon she brings a' the meat, an' the fish, an' the fools, an' the ither mixtures, an' sets them a' oot on the lang table; an' wi' that she gaes awa' up tae her room, an' in a wee while she cries doun tae Jane,—

“Gae ben an' tell the mistress I'm ta'en sick, an' a sair head, an' a pain i' my inside, and I'm awa' tae my bed.”

“Oh, Agnes,” cried Jane, “whatever will we do? and the folk coming! Could ye no' haud up a wee till the denner's by?”

“I'm no' gaun tae try; jist dae as I bid ye.”

‘But first and foremost Jane ran doun tae me, tae see what I thought, an' gin I wad come an' speak tae the mistress, or speak tae Agnes, or aiblins mak' the denner ready. But I says, says I, “Na, na; gif it had been the housekeeper, or the maister, I wad hae come in a jiffey an' dune my best, but I'll no' meddle with this wyte.¹” Sae Jane, puir lass, gaed aff an' tell't the auld madam hoo cook had ta'en ill an' was awa' tae her bed.

“What do you mean, girl? Is cook not at her work?” an' she pulls oot her goold watch, an' says she, “It's half-past three o'clock now; tell cook she must take care and not be late with her dinner.” Than, noticing the disjaskit² look on the lassie's face,—for she's a decent cratur, Jane, an' tak's a raal pride in her wark,—my leddy rase an' followed her into the kitchen.’

¹ Responsibility where blame might follow.

² Jaded, dejected.

'Pity me!' I exclaimed; 'what a position for her to be in, for she can do nothing herself! Mrs. Graham, now, could have cooked the dinner, and been independent of every one.'

'Aiblins,' said Mrs. Scott drily; 'but ye see, there war things stan'in' jist as they cam' oot the shops, no' even the fools drawn; an' gin there had been ten cooks i' the stead o' wan, they cudna hae been readied i' the time; an' the mistress jist gaed ae look roun', an' then she gaed her head a toss, an' tuk up the stair tae the women's room. By this time cook was strippit an' sittin' up in bed, an' Jessie haudin' a basin till her head, an' her black hair a' hingin' doun, streakit an' wat, an' a big white vinegar-claith laid across her croon.

"What's all this, cook?" says the mistress; but cook ne'er lat on she heard her, but loutit¹ doun ower the dish, an' set up sicc an' eldrritch² grane, the auld leddy jist turned withershins³ aboot an' fled awa' doun the stair quicker than she had come up, an' tuk straicht oot bye, an' packit James aff for the doctor.'

'Dear me, Mrs. Scott!' I managed to edge in, as the worthy woman paused to take breath; 'what a terrible affair! and how did it all end?'

'Oh, jist as ye might guess; for I think every ane o' them had been len'in' a helpin' han' tae carry on the ploy,—'cept maybe Jane; she's an artless thing, an' they wadna daur lippen⁴ her: for

¹ Bent down.

³ Wrong ways about.

² Ghastly frightful.

⁴ Trust to.

James, he never gangs near oor ain auld family doctor, but he seeks Parliament' (Parliament was the *sobriquet* of a gentleman I knew of only by report—a medical practitioner of indifferent character, who, when he was sober enough to do anything, attended the working classes, and took what fees they pleased to give him); 'an', in course,' continued Mrs. Scott, 'he has a wee drap in, has Parliament; an' he jist gies a bit grip at her pulse, an' a gledge¹ at her tongue, an' chuck's her aneath the chin,—for she was jist lyin' lauchin' at him,—an' than he bids James drive him back, and bring oot a bottle o' pheesic.'

'I hope he sent it hot and strong,' I said in my indignation; 'or perhaps,' as a second thought, 'a composing draught might better have met the case. Agnes must have been greatly excited before she ventured on such extreme measures.'

'Atweel, they might baith hae been the better o' a gude dose o' "soothing syrup,"' replied Mrs. Scott, who was not without a touch of humour of her own; 'for Jessie said there was an unco brulzie² atween her an' the auld mistress neist day; an' she was for garrin'³ her tak' the gate there an' than, but Agnes wadna steer a fit-length for her; but she packed up her claes an' sent her kist⁴ up here, an' she says that gin ye tak' the ither side, she'll flit the minit ye gang hame.'

'And flit she will,' I said indignantly, 'but it will

¹ A sly glance.

² A broil, a disturbance.

³ Making.

⁴ Chest for clothes.

be at my time, and not at hers. A woman who could plan and carry out such a desperate act is no safe inmate of any decent house. And the master, Mrs. Scott,' I asked, with some interest, 'what part did he take in the affair ?'

'Oh, for oor maister—well, I think he jaloosed¹ hoo things war ganging fra the first. Ye see, it was nae oncommon thing wi' hus tae hae a bit tulzie² afore ye cam'; sae whan he heard there wad be nae denner that nicht, he jist quaitly ordered his horse an' rade awa' doun tae the manse, tae warn them, he said; an' whaur he gaed afterhins, I kenna, but the bairnses' faither had tae speer³ at him anent some wark for the morning, an' he had tae sit up till intae the sma' hours for him—an' ye ken that's no' oor maister's gait.'

'No indeed,' I replied warmly, for it did not lessen my displeasure against cook to think that she had been the means of driving my master to the manse. Foolish as I knew it was, I never could help feeling a heavy dull thud of pain, for all the world like a blow, whenever I heard of Matthew Dale being in Grace Graham's company.

But what a change a few minutes often makes in what we call our world ! As the too glinting morning is often the delusive precursor of a rainy day, so it is when we are building most securely on our bright prospects that the chilly damps of unexpected disaster obscure our shining horizon, and the dark clouds of adversity come rolling up the

¹ Suspected.

² A quarrel, a fight.

³ Inquire.

happy valley on whose sweet incline we had thought to pitch our tabernacle. 'Master, it is good for us to be here,' we say in one of those ecstatic moments when the world is smiling around us; but even while we are speaking, the cloud comes up and overshadows us, and 'we fear as we enter into the cloud.'

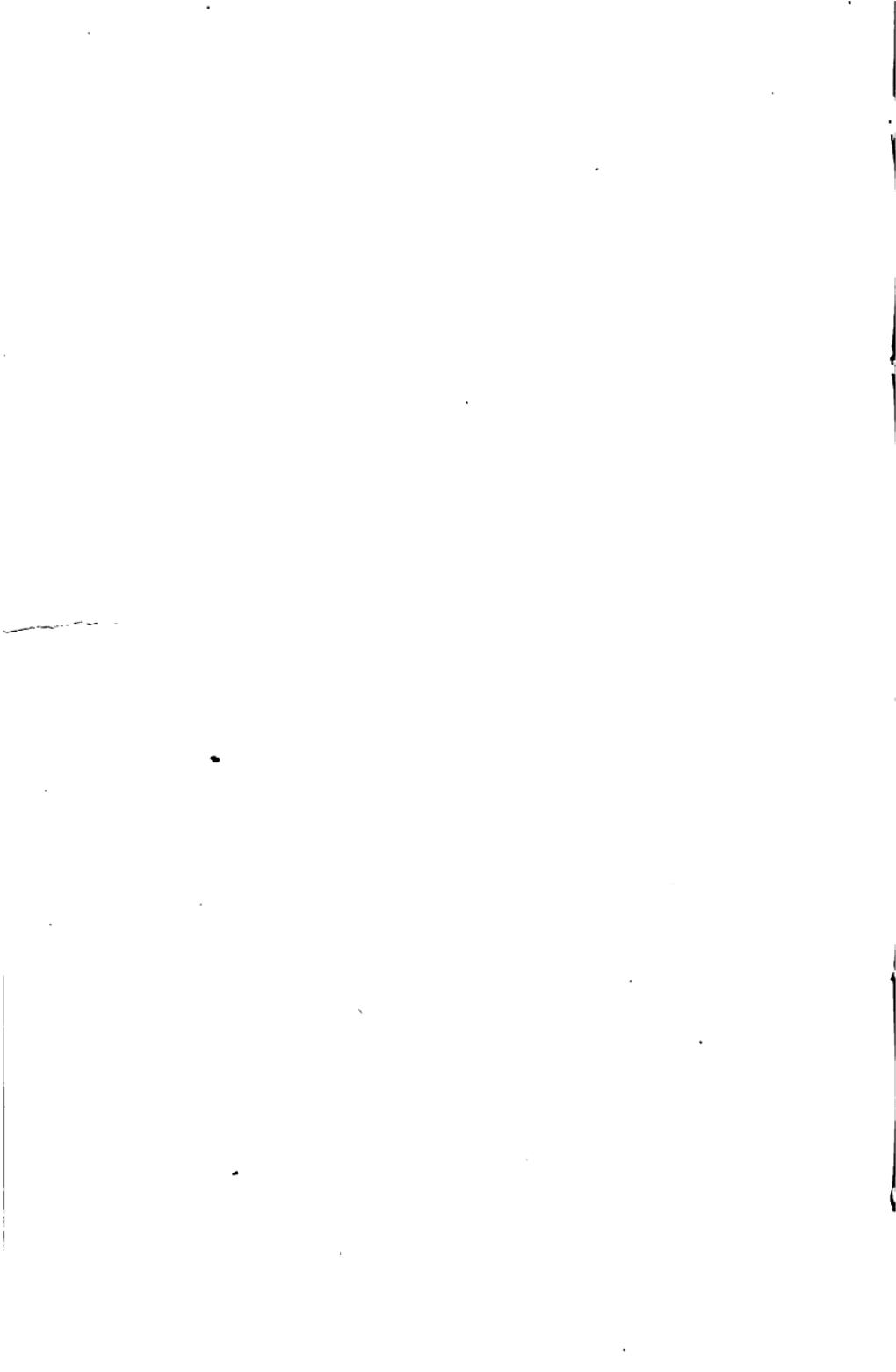
The misconduct of a servant, and the vagaries of a temporary inmate, may seem a small thing to upset so completely the balance of a woman's mind; but, reader, remember, Hallyards was my world! I knew no other! And, big world or little, as the fates allot to us, we must find our pleasures therein, and no fear but we will contrive for ourselves a plenitude of pain. It is not the extended sphere, any more than the circumscribed one, that gives the measure of our capacity for sorrow or for joy. The pathos of real tragedy is not to be found on the battle-field of the world alone; neither are the most satisfying forms of bliss of which this poor earth can boast, to be sought for more in the busy haunts of men than in the quietness of the domestic hearth, in the limited circle of family life. Men of the world, it is true, affect to look down from their mountain heights on us dwellers in the plain. They deny us the power of being happy or miserable in their intense fashion. But let us sink the misery, for that can be had anywhere! And for happiness?—Well!—

They are poor creatures indeed, who, destitute of resource within themselves, rush into the crowd

in pursuit of pleasure, or at least of the sensation they miscall by that name; they have lost the true zest of life, and in no long time the crowd, in turn, will cease to satisfy their cravings—and what then?



BOOK II.





CHAPTER XIII.

T A M I N G S H R E W S.

JHAD sent James on to the house, which was only a few hundred yards distant, with the horse and trap; and after hearing Mrs. Scott's disturbing story, I made up my mind that it would be advisable to see the chief delinquent before encountering Mrs. Ryland. With this end in view, I walked quietly down to the kitchen-door, which I had barely entered when I was met in quite a demonstrative fashion by the woman I wanted. While trying to cover her consciousness in this way, it wanted no spectacles to observe the under-current of excitement under which she was evidently still labouring; but, at the same time, I saw that she was putting herself to some trouble to secure my good graces, for she had a comfortable meal of tea and hot meat awaiting me, which she said she had prepared as soon as she heard James come back, and found out, she added significantly, that I wasna far behind him.

So poor cook, who used to be so off-hand and independent, had come down to the level of that low code of morals which teaches us to fawn for favour, and which looks so like doing as we would be done by, that, while we are only angling with unlawful bait, we deceive ourselves with the fancy that we are following the Christian precept! But I received her advances in a friendly way; for I have always subscribed to the spirit of British law—that we must hold a man innocent till we have proved him guilty.

‘You have been ill, cook, I hear. You had better just come to my room, and tell me about it while I take my tea.’ For I fancied there was no time to be lost in carrying out my plans; and I was confirmed in this notion by a message from Mrs. Ryland, just as I was sitting down to table, to the effect that she wished to see me at once.

‘Just say, Jane, please, that I am having a cup of tea after my journey, and that I will come when I have finished. Now, cook, you can go on with your story,’ I said, turning to her; ‘I can listen and eat.’

But the woman seemed at a loss for a beginning. She had not that natural freedom of utterance which made Mrs. Scott so eloquent, or rather so endless, a *raconteur*; and besides, her specialities being sulkiness and contradiction, she had always to wait till opposition, in some shape, brought out these failings. I knew that by and by, when I began to reprove and condemn her, she would be

violent enough; but at present, in comparatively calm blood, she had not a word to say, and stood apparently engrossed in the plaiting of a certain corner of her apron, and helplessly shifting from the right leg to the left, and *vice versa*, as if she hoped, by an equitable distribution of corporeal weight, to adjust other disturbed balances as well.

I proceeded quietly to pour out my tea, and help myself to bread and meat, while my conscience-stricken delinquent tried each leg alternately as the best basis of operations. But neither the much-enduring limbs nor the unfortunate apron seemed to furnish the excitement she required; so at last, as a motive power, I remarked, 'I am afraid, from all I hear, Agnes, that you have failed to keep your promises to me at the time I re-engaged you, and that you have been indulging yourself in some very unseemly proceedings.'

As spark to powder, as fire to flax, as fuse to the deadly dynamite, so burst forth the flash of angry passion that I knew so well was only waiting ignition to break bounds. Planting her feet firmly below her, throwing the now despised apron from her hand, and putting her arms akimbo, with flashing eyes and scowling visage she proceeded to justify all she had done, and to describe herself as the most down-trodden of mortals!

'And how could you,' she asked at last, in language more forcible than choice, 'who know as well as I do what a deevil the maister's sister is,

lay the blame on me, who have had to put up with such contrary way?’

‘Agnes,’ I said reprovingly, ‘you must not speak so, and indeed I do not see that you had so much to put up with after all.’

‘No’ much to put up with!’ she echoed; ‘was it no’ much to be slighted before my neighbours, an’ to say that I couldna be trusted wi’ the books—me, that never in all my life laid a han’ on what didna belang tae me? I don’t know what you would call much, but to be misdoubted for a thief is what I’ll never thole,¹ no’ frae the best mistress that ever steppit, let alone a deil’s-buckie² like her.’

In vain I set before the excited woman Mrs. Ryland’s peculiarities. She failed to see that the lady was in any way entitled to a monopoly of these unpleasant characteristics; and though trying to defend the higher powers, as in duty bound, I could not help feeling, as between man and man, that cook had not the worst side of the argument.

Then I fell back on our Christian obligations, and quoted to her St. Peter’s eloquent words, so pertinent to the case on hand, and affording an injunction so plain, that truly ‘he may run that readeth it.’

‘For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.’

But this was a view of duty quite beyond poor

¹ Endure.

² A person of a perverse temper.

cook's philosophy. Forgetting the high authority I cited—'Never!' she exclaimed; 'I'll put up with much, but to be blamed when I'm innocent, I never will give in to.'

'You'll miss the glory, then, Agnes. No one will thank you for taking it patiently when you are in fault.'

'Then I'll just be to miss it; an' if that's what ye expect o' me, I'll e'en take my wages and flit.'

'No, Agnes,' I said firmly and quietly, 'that's not what you'll do. Of course, after what has happened, your engagement terminates with the present half-year. I could never leave you in charge again after the small respect you have shown for the credit of the family, and the bad example you have set before the younger servants. But you must make out your time if you wish to earn your money; I suppose you know the law on that head?'

How this capable, clever woman allowed her temper to transform her when she found I was neither to be threatened nor cajoled! What a melancholy spectacle did she afford of the debasing power of sin! With her features distorted, her reason beclouded, and the torrent of evil speech let loose, it would have been hard to say to what lower depth she could have sunk. Revolting as is the sight of a drunken woman, surely one given up for the time being to the whirlwind of angry passion does not need to yield the palm to any miserable exhibitant of depravity.

Silent as much from sorrow as from anger, I did not attempt to interrupt her; and even when a pause for breath occurred, I could only survey her in a dull, dazed sort of way, without attempting to fill up the breaks in the storm.

‘Speak, will ye, Miss Forbes dear, or I’ll burst!’ at last she shrieked out; and, fearing that reason might be actually unseated on its throne, or that some physical malady little short of the one she dreaded might be induced by the strong mental excitement underwhich she laboured, I peremptorily ordered her to sit down, and proceeded to give her the sedative she asked for.

It seemed to do her good, for a violent fit of weeping succeeded the other storm, and I hailed it with the satisfaction with which one sees the rain come down when thunders shake the earth and lightnings flash along the sky.

After a time the much-to-be-pitied victim of what was probably a hereditary taint—transmitted from same morose father of her race, who had eaten the sour grapes, and set the children’s teeth on edge—grew calmer by degrees, and said that, if Mrs. Ryland were out of the house, there was no place she would ever like so well as Hallyards, and that she would never get a mistress again that she could work under so peaceably as she had done with me,—all which I read between the lines to mean, that she was very unwilling to leave the theatre of her love-affair, and resign the boards, on which she had undoubtedly been queening it, to her rivals.

But I showed her it was imperative that both she and I should have a fresh start, unhampered by trust betrayed and the prestige of a bad name ; and then I dismissed her to her work, and ascended to the drawing-room to have conflict number two with the other turbulent member of the household.

Mrs. Ryland had evidently been 'nursing her wrath to keep it warm,' and sat a very 'sulky, sullen dame,' by the time I could attend to her summons, hardly deigning to give me the slightest form of greeting when I entered, but launching into her subject at once.

'Have you heard how that audacious woman has been disgracing the house?' she asked.

'Yes, I have heard the whole story both from Mrs. Scott and from cook herself,' I replied.

'And of course you have dismissed her?'

This was what I would have been asked to do had I fallen in with Mrs. Ryland first ; and it was because I suspected what would be required of me that I hastened to arrange matters below-stairs before any requests or commands had been laid upon me by the self-constituted authority I was now confronting.

'Agnes will make out her time,' I replied, 'but will leave at the term. I had re-engaged her for the coming half-year ; but after her conduct during my absence, I do not consider her a fit person to have under me.'

'And do you make no account of my annoyance, Mrs. Forbes? Do you suppose I can live under

the same roof with a servant who has defied me?’

Now, considering that Mrs. Ryland’s visit was virtually at an end when her son left, and that she was prolonging it entirely for her own pleasure, and also, that her interference with the servants was equally uncalled and unwished for, it did seem a little hard that I should be asked to face considerations with which I had nothing earthly to do, and that, in fact, rested solely with herself.

All the same, it was a delicate matter to discuss with her ; but, calling to my aid what little tact I possessed, I gave her to understand that if she chose to get to loggerheads with the servants, it was no part of my duty to extricate her from the dilemma,—that as she made her bed so she must lie on it, and if it was not so smooth as it might have been, she had only her own imprudence to blame for it.

Then it was the lady’s turn to storm and rage ; and in a slightly more ladylike way she did it, neither using profane language nor threatening to ‘burst,’ like her less cultured antagonist, but, like her,—for there is a wonderful family likeness among all Eve’s daughters,—winding up the scene with a torrent of angry tears.

When I had had as much as flesh and blood could stand, I quietly observed that it had better be referred to the master. Then, as usual at this threat, she came down from her high horse, and ‘chopped round,’ as poor Ned would have said

with quite startling abruptness ; and ere I left her presence, she was pleased to observe that perhaps, after all, I had taken the best plan with the delinquent.

So we all wrought on together, a very disorganized household, till the term—mistrust and dislike having taking the place of the good understanding I had left behind me when I started for my holiday. I often thought to myself that I paid dearly for my pleasure ; and it was many a day before I had the heart to bring out my beautiful dress and flaunt it in the face of our domestic troubles.

But it was some solace to think of my brother James, and what I had been enabled to effect for him ; and away down in my heart was a comforting remembrance I would never cease to cherish—my master's bright face of welcome, and the satisfied way he said 'that maybe now we would get some peace about the place again.'





CHAPTER XIV.

UNWELCOME GUESTS.

N strong and hardly unexpressed disgust with us all, Mrs. Ryland, shortly after my return, 'took up her carriages' and departed to her own home; and, as Mrs. Scott had remarked of her on a former occasion, 'there wasna ane tae dicht an e'e for her.'

Then I sought out and engaged another cook, and got poor Agnes—who could never speak of leaving Hallyards but with tears in her eyes—another and a better place than I had dared to hope for. And her subsequent career in her new place, and her after-history, justified the specific efforts I made for her, and proved, in a general way, the propriety of giving our lapsed but repentant fellow-creatures another chance, by starting them afresh on life's ladder; but it must be where they will be unhampered by a surrounding atmosphere of damaging antecedents. It is not in human nature to be able altogether to forget a brother's shame;

some generous souls will sit upon it more lightly than others; but if we do not speak it with our lips, we may look it with our eyes, and nip in the tender bud the new upspringing of the self-respect that had been dead and buried in the dark winter of disgrace.

Our new cook, though far less experienced than the old, was doubly wasteful and extravagant; so that I was put to much extra trouble in weighing and giving out the various articles in daily use,—even having to choose between rationing the kitchen dinner-table, or taking my stand at it every day and carving for the servants, as some of the farmers' wives in the neighbourhood did not scorn to do. But Grissel was a faithful, well-meaning, douce creature, and, being advanced in life, treated the young men more like sons than as possible sweethearts, which relieved me of much anxiety when they were all out of my sight. Thus what I lost in one way I gained in another, as is generally the case. For, on the whole, there is not so much difference among people—keeping off the really criminal classes; but where there is a prominent failing, there will also, most probably, be some marked good quality, and a mean capacity often finds its compensation in a sterling integrity.

There is, therefore, little to be dreaded in entering on a new engagement, provided we can make allowances for the common infirmities of our nature, and feel a humble desire to be a benefit and a blessing to every fellow-creature who thus, as it

were, passes through our hands, and who—for there is no standing still in this world—must either be the better or the worse for the contact.

I was also pleased to see that my favourite Jessie won her old sweetheart back again; indeed, I had long suspected that Tom, who was rather a knowing youth, had never had any higher end in view in his flirtations with the mistress of the kitchen than the free run of the dainties she was enabled from her position to afford him. So with cook's departure this cupboard-love came to a natural conclusion; and it was not long thereafter till Jessie told me, with many smiles and blushes, that 'Tam had been leukin' sair, an' she thought he wad be speakin' sune, an' I had better be speerin' after a new derry.'

But I persuaded Jessie not to be in such hot haste, even if she got the chance; and by dint of a few judicious words to both the young aspirants after matrimony, I got them to begin to put by some trifle against the housekeeping, and to delay the setting of it up until such time as they could make a clear start in the world. Out of debt out of danger, I used to tell them; and Tom had pride enough and sense to see how much pleasanter it would be to take Jessie to a well-plenished house, all bought and paid for, than getting things on credit, or rubbing on without them.

I took a kind of maternal oversight of the loves of Tom and Jessie. They were of so suitable an age, and such a likely young couple in every

respect, that it was a real pleasure trying to promote their happiness. But there was another marriage, at this time much spoken of among us, that did not engage my interest—or rather, that did not inspire me with the satisfaction I felt in this.

Alas, poor me! As well might I have been asked to rejoice had a sentence of banishment, ay, or even of death, been passed on me; and hard enough work it was to go on with my daily task, the common round, quietly and evenly, while all the time I felt as if the world was slipping from under my feet, and that any moment I might be launched on an uncertain sea, where 'neither sun nor moon would for many days appear.'

In rural communities neighbours take a keen and abiding interest in each other's affairs; so that it was quite in the course of ordinary conversation I heard that the manse was about to undergo some extensive repairs, and that the family would require to vacate it for a few weeks. If I thought about the matter at all, it was certainly without regret; for I am free to confess that, leaving Alice Burnley out of the reckoning, I did not much fancy any of them, excepting perhaps the minister, who was, as Mrs. Scott said, 'a wordy¹ man,' and would have been worthier still had he been more worthily mated. But men as well as women can 'decline on a lower level,' and Mrs. Graham was weak and worldly,

¹ Worthy.

and fond of making professions that had no real existence,—in consequence of which her preaching and her practice often inconveniently disagreed. I never saw her but she put me in mind of veneer,—she looked so much better than she really was; while there were little chips and cracks about her through which the true material plainly showed, and gave one an uneasy feeling that she would go on deteriorating with the lapse of time.

I remember that, on the night I heard the casual remark about the manse, I dreamt I came upon the Grahams camping out on the public roadside, with tent, and pole, and kettle, all in regular gipsy fashion; and in the morning I wondered to myself what had set me dreaming about the manse folks and their affairs. And then I dismissed the subject from my mind.

But I found that my dream was but the beginning, and not the end, of the matter to me. The same day, when I went as usual to feed my poultry, I found my master evidently waiting for me at the gate, which he did not open for me on this occasion, but stood leaning against it in a way that prevented me doing it for myself.

‘Have you heard about the manse, Miss Forbes?’

‘Yes, I have heard.’

‘It’s quite a big job: new windows in the front, and a new roof, and an addition to the back. It will cost a good bit of money; but the house

really needs it, and I am glad Graham is getting it,—though perhaps, had I been a heritor, instead of only a tenant-farmer, I might have taken another view of the matter.'

Now, that my master should keep me standing there, with the poultry-corn in my hand, to hear him air his opinions about the manse repairs, was just a little too absurd; and I did not think myself called upon to make even a pretence of showing an interest I certainly did not feel.

'You see,' he went on, getting all the talk to himself, and I daresay hardly knowing how to carry it further, 'they never had a bath-room at the manse,—and even from a sanitary point of view alone, a bath is quite indispensable.'

I felt ready to box my master's ears. What was manse sanitation to me?—unless, indeed, Miss Graham would utilize the new bath I supposed they were about to have by drowning her love in it. So, just for the purest spite, I remarked, 'Well, as the minister perspires profusely, I daresay a bath will be useful.'

Whatever made me fall foul of the good, harmless man? Was it that I durst not trust myself just then to speak of the wife or daughter? while of Alice, I do not know what I could have got to say against her, even if I had been base enough to try. To me, about this time, she had become the living embodiment of 'the king's daughter—all glorious within; ' and, poor lost creature that I was, I had

got the length of thinking that if the world—by which, I suppose, I meant Hallyards and its master—failed me, I would be well content to be one of ‘the virgins her companions that follow her.’

Mr. Dale did not resent my rude remark about his friend, as he ought to have done, but looking at me with a gravity which I could see was more assumed than real, ‘Yes,’ he said; ‘Graham does sweat a good deal at his work—more than the end’ quite justifies, perhaps you think? but’—and the ghost of a smile just flitted across his face—‘you will be sorry to hear they are going to be put to so much inconvenience. Mrs. Graham was saying last night she thought they would be obliged to camp out.’

Then my dream flashed into my mind; and as dreams are said to go by contraries, I began to see that our scheming neighbour would not be driven under canvas at this time.

‘I was thinking,’ continued Mr. Dale, with some hesitation, as if groping his way,—‘I was thinking that, if you have no objections, they might just as well come down here. We have plenty of room; and the minister cannot well leave the parish.’

Objections! How could I object? I could not tell my master that to me Miss Graham was as water to a mad dog, or as a red rag to an angry bull; and far less could I tell him the reason why, even if I got him to understand the rest,

‘Are they all coming?’ I asked, rather irrelevantly—for I should have noticed that my master had paid me the high compliment of consulting my convenience before inviting them; but under excitement one is so apt to seize on every point but the right one. However, he took no notice of my harebrained abruptness, but replied quite meekly,—

‘Maggie goes to the Ladies’ College, and the boys are to pay a long visit to their grandmother. It is only the old folks and the two young ladies that I should think of asking to come here; they would only want three rooms at the most.’

Besides Grace, there was a second daughter, Margaret, who, little as I thought it then, is now very near and dear to me, and two young boys who were yet attending school.

With many a wry face, I set about my preparations. Distasteful as they were to me, it would have been still more so to have given our unwelcome guests the chance of observing a want of method in the household over which I presided. On the whole, I believe it is oftener love of self than love to our neighbour that prompts our kindly deeds; we live in such an atmosphere of self, that it is more than doubtful if the best of us ever get much beyond it.

A week saw Mr. and Mrs. Graham, Grace, and Alice all installed at Hallyards—visitors in name; but everything they either said or did seemed to

me to point to the dreaded consummation. I daresay I took a distorted view of matters ; but the facts were there, or I fancied they were, which came to the same thing, as far as my fears were concerned.





CHAPTER XV.

TOUGH OLD MUTTON.

NATURALLY, with so large an addition to our family, the work within the dwelling was much increased, though the manse housemaid came down to help, but in reality to hinder it: for, at first, Jane and she spent their time in loving converse, to the great neglect of duty; and, at last, in heart-burning arguments about everything to which they required to put their hands. If visitors throw a quiet household out of gear for the time being, surely visitors' servants are the very incarnation of evil for upsetting and disorganizing both themselves and the family they invade; and this one, though a well-conducted, quiet, clever girl at home, contrived to set all the servants at Hallyards by the ears, and at war with one another and herself, before she had been any time about the place.

So this visit, or rather inroad, of the manse party—as I dreaded from the first—turned out a

season of much mental and bodily excitement to me ; but when I could command a leisure hour, Alice Burnley brought her work or a book to my room, and we either chatted or read aloud, as the humour seized us. But I fear I often made but an indifferent listener ; for how could I give myself up to either book or talk, when, from the upper sash of my window, I could see my master and Miss Graham sauntering about the terrace, or seated together on one of the garden-chairs—she with her knitting (I believe it was socks for him), and he with the social-looking cigar !

I tried to grin and bear it, and attend to what Alice was saying, and give her coherent replies ; for she was often talking about our absent sailor, and I sometimes managed to forget my own troubles by sympathizing with hers.

‘ Did you know we were actually engaged at one time, Ned and I ? ’ Miss Burnley asked of me one day, when much of the confidential talk with which women are accustomed to cement their friendships had drawn us very close.

‘ No, indeed,’ I said, with much surprise ; ‘ I never heard of that.’

‘ We were both very young,’ she sighed ; ‘ but indeed I do not remember the time when I did not love Ned, and I have loved him always, through it all.’

‘ And may I ask what broke it off ? ’ I said.

‘ Oh, I did it myself, Annie ! ’ She sometimes called me Annie, and wished me to use her

christened name also ; but I considered it hardly respectful for one in my position to do so, and so stuck to Miss Alice, or Miss Burnley.

‘But how could you ?—loving him so !’ I asked ; for love, or rather the loved one, was with me, at that time, an idol at whose shrine every reasonable feeling and right principle was to be sacrificed.

I saw Alice’s taper fingers working nervously, and it was some seconds ere she spoke again ; then, lifting up her pure, sweet face, ‘Can you ask, Annie, knowing him so ? Can two walk together except they be agreed ?’

I knew how much it cost her to say this. For she was no mere enthusiast, Alice, with her religion on her tongue-tip, ready for show, if not for use ; and I tried to picture myself in her place, and sit upon my case, and discover whether or not, if such a trial of faith had come between me and my love, my strength would have upheld me in a plain path.

But I know now what I failed to see at that time—we have no more business to tempt ourselves with imaginary trials than would Peter have been justified in casting himself into the water to see whether he would sink or swim. Strength equal to our day is the promise—

‘But foredate the day of woe,
And alone thou bear’st the blow.’

And I was even then, in my folly, bearing a fore-dated woe—bearing it in all the plenitude of a strength that was but weakness, ‘wearied running

with the footmen,' and asking myself painfully, 'How wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan ?'

Alice had also the advantage of me in another respect—that while her troubles could be spoken of, mine could not bear the light of day upon them. So we sat with our open and our secret sorrows ; while Miss Graham, with my master in tow, sailed about the terrace and the drawing-room as if they were already her own ; and the good minister and his wife plodded cheerfully along, apparently well pleased with the progress of events.

But, alas ! how unconsciously sometimes we put our foot in things !—ay, even put our foot through them, and never know ! One fine morning my master came to my room to speak about some stores that were wanted from Dunsford. I was busy with my book-keeping when he entered—for, for some time back, he had set up a farm-ledger, and given me the keeping of it ; and as he stood with his hands grasping a chair-back watching me, without speaking, I went on with my entries under difficulties—deeming it would be time enough to abandon my occupation when he addressed me. My window was down from the top ; for the summer was at its height, and, being near the kitchen, the room was apt to get unpleasantly warm.

Mr. and Mrs. Graham were rambling about the grounds, I knew, just outside ; but, in the interest of balancing my book, I had forgotten all about

them, till the patter of their feet and the sound of their voices struck on my ear ; and though my master must have become aware of their proximity as well, he neither stirred nor spoke.

‘Fine grand old place this,’ floated in through the open window in the minister’s deepest bass.

‘Out of the common altogether,’ piped his wife in a thin treble.

‘Magnificent old elms these ! Just shows what splendid soil it must be to produce such grand timber,’ came next in a good alto ; for the lady had moved off a little, and as the male performer did not know of his second audience, there was no reason why he should not speak out and let her hear.

‘Dale was in luck to get such a place,’ sang back his wife to him ; ‘but the Dales, and Matthew particularly, were always upsetting and ambitious.’

‘Look for the gown, and ye’ll maybe get the sleeve,’ chuckled the minister.

‘There’s one thing he wants yet, and that’s a wife,’ observed Mrs. Graham impressively. ‘Ye would see what ill-hung mutton that chit of a housekeeper set us down to last night—as tough as old Dale himself !’

‘Was it?’—as if that were indeed a climax. ‘I cannot say I noticed it, my dear ; but I daresay you are right,’ chimed in the minister, as they moved off, cooing out their connubial confidences ; while I worked furiously at my arithmetic, as if my life depended on it.

I wondered much that my master did not overturn a chair, or in some way scare the conversationalists ere their remarks became so personal ; and I wondered even more if he had heard them all—especially that last one, which sounded so strangely, coming from a prospective mother-in-law ! But I had to wonder on ; for I never learned till two years later, when travelling with my master,—though I had left his service by that time,—and seated by his side at *table d'hôte* in a Highland hotel, struggling with an uncompromising cut from some old patriarch of the flock. Then, bending towards me with that smile of his, which was always to my perhaps partial mind like a revelation of the supernal, he quietly said, ‘It’s as tough as old Dale—isn’t it ?’

But at the time, when I felt composed enough to turn round and face my master, he was standing perfectly calm and unmoved—not even by the twitching of a muscle did he betray himself.

‘ Well, Miss Forbes, has the sum-total come right ?’ he said.

‘ All right, sir,’ I replied ; and then we proceeded to discuss the matter that brought him there—for since the Grahams had been with us, he had got into a way of coming to my room to discuss the commissariat. I thought then that he was unduly anxious to have everything in good order ; but I must confess I had no other evidence of it than that he came bothering (as the maids say) so often to speak about the supplies.

I was somewhat curious to observe what effect, if any, this little episode would have on my master's relations with his guests ; but there was no apparent difference that I could see, excepting that I fancied he devoted himself more emphatically to Mrs. Graham, and hung less about her daughter than before. And Alice, who did not say much about her cousin at any time, but smiled a kind of pleased acquiescence in all that was going on, remarked to me one day that she 'doubted if the air at Hallyards was agreeing with Grace ; for she had been cross and peevish lately, which she never was at home.'

I thought to myself that it would not be any deficiency of ozone in our air, so much as her host's shortcomings, that was affecting Miss Graham's temper ; but as Alice gave me no inlet, I did not think it would be becoming in me to hazard any such suggestion ; besides, I saw so little of Grace, and consequently had so few opportunities of judging, that any remark of mine must have appeared the wildest guessing.

Lieutenant Ryland had now been gone about two months ; and, as his ship was under orders for the west coast of Africa, we were daily looking for letters, either from St. Vincent, Madeira, or even from his ultimate destination. His mother, we knew, had never had so much as a line from him since he left ; but, as his uncle had heard from him before the ship sailed, we—that is, Alice and I, who beguiled the time with much harmless specu-

lation on the subject—came to the conclusion that as Mr. Dale had been the last, so he would most probably be the first, to hear from our absent one. Instead, however, of hearing from Ned himself, a harassing letter arrived from a friend of the family, who was connected with the Admiralty, and who took a kind of oversight of our sailor. But it is a fruitless task trying to help those who will not help themselves; and the writer said that he was reluctantly obliged to inform Mr. Dale that his nephew was going on from bad to worse, and advising his recall by his relatives—that is, that he should resign his commission to save disgrace.

So Alice came to me one morning, in white-faced, dry-eyed grief, hardly able to tell her woful tale, but anxious too to speak of it,—for ‘sorrow loves,’ the poet says, ‘to babble itself to sleep.’ Mrs. and Miss Graham had devoted themselves to the consolation of the uncle, who, to tell the truth, was more angry than grieved; and thus there was no one to speak a word of comfort to the poor girl who was most crushed by this new complication,—though her cousin was fully aware of the deep and unchanging love she felt for Ned Ryland; and, being in the toils herself, and not without her anxieties, she should have reserved her sympathy for the quarter where it was really needed.

But it was in my arms—me, an alien in blood, in position, without even the tie of old acquaintance—that poor motherless Alice at length found relief in tears; and I was thankful to see them fall,

for the first look I got of her pale face scared me, and I knew how she had been building on this voyage for weaning Ned from his love of strong drink. Neither had I been altogether unhopeful myself that, as he would be getting plenty of exercise and natural excitement, it might supersede the craving for artificial stimulant, which in his case was all the more inexcusable, as he was physically strong, and, by psychological deduction, should have been mentally and morally so as well.

It was a kind of puzzle to me at this time that Alice, open as she was to Ned's faults, should yet be so fond of him. Love is blind, they say ; but her love, though deep and strong, was like a pure pellucid stream, which reflected rather than veiled the weeds and tangles that choked its current. It was part of her nature—the ethical part, I suppose—which led her to hate the sin, while loving the sinner ; but I am free to confess that it was a kind of transcendental state, too elevated for me to reach ; for, while it was hardly left to me to doubt that Alice would almost have died for Ned, while refusing to connect herself with him, I think I would have married my love below the gallows-tree ! To be sure, I took much higher ground with good Mrs. Scott, when she spoke of Ned Ryland as a suitable match for me ; but then there was awanting there the love that hallows all things, even to the white-washing of a sinner.

So I spoke a little sharply to Alice as she lay in my arms, and her slight frame shaken with sobs,

for I thought Ned incapable of returning her affection, and I wanted to waken her up to the fact; but it would not do—she did not seem able to take a hint, and I had not the moral hardihood to speak more plainly.

‘Oh, Annie!’ she said, when she grew calmer, which was all the perceptible effect my words had upon her—and time alone would have brought about that end,—‘Oh, Annie! I thought my lad might have come back to me clothed and in his right mind.’

Alas! even then Ned was on his homeward voyage, more out of his ‘right mind’ than ever—not clothed, as Alice understood it, not even in the outer and inner garb of a manly walk and conversation, but as a prisoner under arrest, on board a returning man-of-war, to be cashiered so soon as he reached port, and his naval prospects at an end for ever.

But we did not know all this then. Some weeks later the blow fell—fell, too, under the most untoward circumstances and at a most inopportune time, aggravating to the very uttermost a sufficiently distressing case.





CHAPTER XVI.

RADICAL REFORM.

THE Grahams lingered on at Hallyards, for the manse repairs progressed but slowly, and I think they liked their quarters, and made no great effort to get home again. It was harvest-time also ; and though the pressure of extra work did not tell so heavily in our house as in many, still it did make some little difference, and I would gladly have been relieved of the incubus of visitors at so busy a season.

Mrs. Graham must have observed that she and her family were outstaying their welcome, for she had already made some half-hearted attempts to fix a time for going ; but nothing final came of it, and at last the day of the harvest-home drew near, and the politic lady remarked, with the air of one conferring a favour, that they would just stay over the festival, and help Miss Forbes through with it.

The harvest-home—or the ‘kirn,’ as we called it

—was always celebrated with great *éclat* at Hall-yards, and was truly the event of the year among our work-people and the neighbours. I had already taken part in one since coming to be housekeeper ; but I was a comparatively new hand then, and had merely carried out the usual programme. With plenty of good material to work upon, and willing hands to aid, this was no hard task ; but this year I had resolved within my own mind to attempt a measure of reform,—and the path of the reformer, whether social, civil, or religious, is always up the Hill Difficulty ! And in this case there were so many different centres whence possible opposition might come, that I hardly knew how or where to begin.

For, thinking over the wrecked lives of many around me,—notably Ned Ryland and Margaret Bell's man,—the intemperate habits of some of our men and many of our neighbours, who called themselves sober, and yet took a glass too much at fairs, weddings, and even funerals, my heart grew hot within me, and burned to help to stem the torrent, even though my utmost effort might only prove me another Mrs. Partington trying to sweep back the Atlantic with a mop.

After much cogitation, I resolved, before speaking to my master, to ventilate the matter among the men. For I felt convinced that he would shrink from any innovation that appeared to savour of shabbiness ; but if the movement seemed to come from the work-people themselves, I knew he would

be more than ready to fall in with anything that would be likely to benefit them.

It was on a beautiful Saturday morning about the middle of September, that 'Jessie the derry,' who worked out regularly in the field during harvest, told me they 'expeckit tae get the *kirn*' on the following Friday. 'Getting the *kirn*' was the vernacular expression, and in using it, the country folks never thought of it in other connection than the agreeable ceremonial of 'supping' slightly soured cream, which had been churned—or 'kirned,' as they called it—just long enough to be whipped up into a tolerably compact froth; while, etymologically, the word has nothing in common, nor bears any reference to the churn at all, but points to the corn or *kirn* spirit of the old field-myth, in whose honour, and for whose propitiation, the primeval rites were celebrated—and many a memory of whom, all unwittingly, the chief ceremonies of the modern harvest-home perpetuate.

As they thus expected to finish the cutting of the crop by the end of the following week, and as we always celebrated the termination of the cutting, instead of waiting for the ingathering, I felt it was full time for me to go to work if my projected reforms were really to take shape in action. Though knowing well that at every week-end the striped pole might fitly have been set up for a sign at most of the cottage-doors, I determined to brave the horrors of the *barbar-ic* ceremonies inseparably connected with Saturday night, for the sake of

finding the men indoors, or rather just outside, where the light was better, and shop-room unlimited. I found, however, on walking down to the foreman's house, that there was more work on hand than I had bargained for, and at first matters looked very unpromising for the discussion of social questions.

It appeared that the 'bairnses' faither' had quite a reputation as a 'poller' of no common excellence; and in view of the approaching kirn, there were, I could not say how many men, old and young, waiting their turn for his professional services; while our Tom, seated on a three-legged stool, was getting what they called the 'bicker dock'—a porridge-basin being inverted on his head, while Mr. Scott, with a pair of wool-shears, deftly shore off all the locks that strayed beneath the rim.

The polling operation was a sufficiently trying one to face; but on the other side of the doorway there was a still more formidable branch of the same trade, which nearly drove me to show the white feather and beat a hasty retreat. With a small looking-glass steadied on the window-sill, razor in hand, face lathered till he was barely recognisable, and shirt-collar well turned down, stood Jamie Bell, our drunken cattleman, carrying on, at Mrs. Scott's expense, certain scrapings and ablutions, the appliances for which, simple though they were, his own impoverished home could not furnish. I think the sight of Jamie nerved me to proceed. As for the men themselves,—unless it were Tom,

who, I think, felt a little ashamed of his incipient dandyism,—they seemed to see nothing incongruous in my watching their proceedings, and were more than usually sociable and talkative.

‘I hear we are to have the kirn on Friday, Mr. Scott,’ I commenced by saying, after wishing them good evening all round.

‘It a’ depen’s on the weather,’ replied the foreman. ‘It’s been maist nautoriously bruckle¹ this harst,² an’ we cudna say for a day or twa.’

‘Of course not,’ I said, falling in with his humour, for our head man was Scott by name, and Scott too by nature, and never liked to commit himself rashly to dates; ‘but, weather permitting,’ I added, ‘I suppose I may prepare for Friday?’

‘Ou ay,’ he replied; ‘I daursay, gin we’re spared, we may cut it oot agen’ Friday; but if otherwise, it’ll aiblins be the fore-en’ o’ the week.’

Knowing that Scott did not at all mean that he was bound to cut out the crop whether in the body or out of the body, and that I ran no risk of having a phantom crew at my harvest board, as his words might have implied, I quietly remarked, ‘Then I may set about getting in the supplies, at any rate; and you had better speak to the master about killing a sheep, for I’ll have nothing but fresh meat at our harvest dinner.’

‘I dinna objec’ tae the taste o’ saut on the meat meesel’, gin it’s no’ owerly,’ put in old David, our first ploughman, who stood leaning by the doorway,

¹ Broken, unsettled.

² Harvest.

and who, having been nearly all his life about the place, doubtless thought himself entitled to a voice in the matter. 'Fegs,' he went on, quite elated with the knowledge he was displaying, 'it's nane the waur o' a pickle saut, an' it gies a ralish tae the drink!'

I gave him a questioning look, and then, by a significant nod, directed his attention to Jamie Bell, who was still busy with his toilet, unduly protracted by the shaking of the hand that held the razor.

I saw from the changed expression of David's face, as he turned round from surveying Jamie, that I had scored a point, and gained the sympathy of one, at least, for a weak brother.

'What would you think,' I said, 'of letting drink alone for a night, and just having a first-rate dinner and plenty of tea and coffee? You would all feel better and stronger, in every way, next day; and surely none of you will say you cannot get your spirits up without pouring spirits down'—a borrowed pun, that I thought would amuse the men, and put them in good humour. Some of them laughed heartily, but Scott asked, in a very surprised voice,—

'An' dae ye raelly mean no' tae hae a cheerer at a'? Wi, there's the maister's health tae drink, an' oors by the maister, an' hus a' tae wus gude-luck an' great ootcome tae the crap! An' for my pairt, I carena if whusky ne'er wat my hass¹ agen; but wi'oot whusky it canna be dune.'

¹ The throat.

'I'm thinkin' it wad be unco dry an' reistit¹ wi'oot the drap drink,' said old David; 'no' at I care a haet² aboot it meesel!'

'I wadna gie a bawbee for a kirn wi'oot the whusky,' candidly commented Jamie Bell.

Jamie had better have kept his opinion to himself, for what my powers of persuasion might have failed to effect, his untimely advocacy settled at once; and it was young Tom, with his usual outspoken disgust of all abuses, whether of too little meat or too much drink, who opened out on Jamie.

'Ye mickle gomeril,³ are ye no' content wi' makin' a beast o' yersel' ilka time ye gang tae Dinsfurd, but ye maun be disgracin' yersel' at the kirn as weel?'

Truly Tom had no manners, as Mrs. Scott had well said of him when I first came to Hallyards; but his roughness was like that of the unpolished diamond, that, whether cut into a thousand sparkling facets, or left in its native form, would be a diamond still. How often at first, in making a new acquaintance, are we repelled by some word, or look, or tone that clashes with our preconceived prejudices! and how do we despise ourselves for our hasty and erroneous judgment, when a closer intimacy reveals the ring of the true metal! Disliking Tom's manner, I had rather held aloof from him, for at least some time; but as his straightforward character showed itself, I began to like him; and though a bit of a flirt

¹ Smoke-dried. ² A petty oath of negation. ³ A blockhead.

among the maids,—who were perhaps more to blame than he,—I found out, by degrees, that where proper feeling and manly good sense were involved, Tom, in his own rough-and-ready way, was the one to exhibit them.

‘And I was thinking,’ I went on to say, ‘if you were willing to give up the drink, we might engage a fiddler, or a couple of them, and let the young folks have a dance. It would be a more healthy and rational excitement than pouring spirits down your throats,’ I added, going a little into the philosophy of the thing.

‘She’s richt,’ said my young ally and advocate. ‘Some o’ hus as kens whan tae stap nicht tak’ a drappie an’ be nane the waur o’t; but there’s ither, agen, that canna be lippened even tae fin’ the smell o’t; sae what say ye, lads, but jist tae fa’ in wi’ the tea an’ the coffee, an’ a gude rattlin’ dance?’

‘I say it nicht be worth tryin’ for ance, an’ no’ tae mak’ a rewel o’t, gin it didna seem tae be jist sae answerable,’ said David.

‘But what’s tae come o’ the speechifyin’?’ asked Scott, who had always proposed the master’s health, and was naturally anxious about his oration.

‘I fancy that can be easily arranged,’ I replied; ‘there are other and better texts to preach from than the senseless practice of drinking healths. The master, I am sure, might be easily persuaded to give a short address; and the minister might say a few words; then you could give us your remarks;

and we could intersperse the speaking with a few good songs, and finish up with the dance.'

'I'll no' say forgain' it, for ane,' said old David, after hearing the programme ; and besides, he had a young family of sons, some of them just growing up to man's estate, and already showing a disposition to take a dram at the fairs.

'If the maister's pleased, I budna be itherwise,' said Scott.

'Ye'll jist mak' a kintra speech o' yersels, wi' yer new-fangled, hadden-in gaits!'¹ quoth Jamie Bell.

'What's gaun on?' questioned Mrs. Scott, coming to the door at that moment with her youngest boy in her arms. 'An' hoo's a' wi' ye, mem?' with a friendly nod to me.

'She's ettling² tae pit awa' the drink at the kirn,' said Tom, indicating me with a jerk of his thumb ; 'an' the verra man 'at sud be backing her up'—with another jerk at Jamie—'reckons we'll be makin' a kintra speech o' oorsels.'

'Is't you, Jamie?' she exclaimed, with an emphasis of scorn that made poor Jamie hang his head. 'My wordens!³ the fear o' that might weel hae keepit ye straucht gin ye had cared muckle for't ; but fa' foul, fa' fair, gie you the drink !'

Jamie slunk away abashed, with that hang-dog look that drunkards often have when the spurious courage—the only kind they know—has sunk to

¹ New-fashioned, shabby ways.

² Aiming, intending.

³ My word.

the ebb, with the ebb of the tide on whose treacherous bosom it shows its hideous face ; and with Jamie vanished the last shreds of opposition to my small measure of reform.

‘Then I’ll tell the master you’re all inclined to try the ‘total’? (this was what they called it). And each after his own fashion gave in his assent ; and, bidding them all good evening, I tripped back from my mission with a light and happy heart.

On the following Monday I told my master as much as I thought it was good for him to know,—we are nothing, we women, if we be not generals occasionally,—reported progress, and asked his sanction and co-operation.





CHAPTER XVII.

FESTIVE PREPARATIONS.

‘**I**T’S a step in the right direction, Miss Forbes,’ my master remarked, when I unfolded my scheme to him. ‘I’m no abstainer myself, as you know; but for the sake of those who have no self-restraint, we’ll try if we cannot enjoy ourselves without artificial aid for once.’

‘In the house as well, sir?’ I asked; for it had always been the fashion at Hallyards for the work-people to dine in the barn at four o’clock, with Mr. Scott presiding, while Mr. Dale entertained a goodly party of the neighbouring farmers and gentry an hour later in the dining-room; and at six o’clock the two parties united, and the toasts and the speeches commenced.

‘Yes, in the house as well,’ replied my master. ‘Those who don’t like it can lump it, as they say; and since you have so bravely set the thing agoing, we’ll carry it right through.’

‘And I have promised the young people a dance, sir, if you have no objections.’

‘We’ll all dance, Miss Forbes,’ he said,—‘old and young! Miss Graham and Miss Burnley will enjoy that; and you also, as the original promoter, must have a large share of the fun.’

‘I’ll dance attendance on the company, sir; it will be as much as I can do.’

‘And you’ll dance the Haymakers with me,’ laughed my grave, sober master; and before I had recovered from my surprise, to say him yea or nay, he was gone.

I now went to work in good earnest. Mr. Dale had given me *carte blanche*, both as to expenses and also as to the number of invitations to be issued. Taking Mrs. Graham, and my no less useful friend the foreman’s wife, into my confidence, we asked, for the dance, all the young people in the neighbourhood who, as far as we could judge, would be likely to enjoy a social meeting of the kind. We heard afterwards that we had erred in supposing that some of our more aristocratic neighbours would not deign to dance at a *kirn*; and what we innocently intended as a compliment to their gentility was in reality an ill-timed recognition of a social status that they would have been quite pleased to sink for the nonce. Thus, with the best intentions, we often judge ourselves and others by a false standard; and there is no cure for it but the keeping of an open mind to the affairs of life, and steering clear of misleading prejudices.

Besides these more strictly private invitations, it had always been the custom at the *kirn* for the work-people to invite a few of their own friends ; and this year, within the bounds of reason, there were to be no restrictions. After the two dinners, there was to be a standing supper, to which the whole company were made welcome to come and go as they pleased ; while the kettle was to be kept at the boil—not for toddy, as had been the wont, but for the old friend that comes up ever with a new face, the well-known and often quoted cup ‘that cheers but not inebriates.’

All went merry as a marriage bell ! Indeed, I almost think Miss Graham already heard the ting-ling of her own marriage-bells in the not too far distance ; for she sang and capered about the house, and altogether got herself into a state of excitement over this *kirn* that appeared to me to be quite unwarrantable on any other grounds. And I, too, had the sound of sweet music ringing in my ears, and my bell went ding, dong, ‘You’ll dance ! you’ll dance with me !’ And all through my work—and it was a busy week, and not a drop of rain fell to stay proceedings—it went sounding on, till at last it actually got the length of saying, or singing, what no really musical bell had ever said or sung before —‘You’ll dance the *Haymakers* with me !’

Alice Burnley alone rebuked our mirth—not indeed in words, but by her pale, sad face and pre-occupied air. Did some premonition of impending disaster weigh down her gentle spirit ? or was it the

old sorrow, yet lying heavy upon her, and forbidding her to participate in our gaiety? For though so good, she was not one of the 'unco gude,' Alice, who see sin in a smile and Satan's cloven foot in every form of pleasure; but, when I first came to Hallyards, before Ned Ryland got so far astray, was as bright an example of a happy, innocent maiden as one could wish to see.

I had sent for old Nurse Janet from Blackadder to assist us; for, in spite of her advanced years, she was still an active, bustling body, and could go through more work than our younger women, who had been accustomed to division of labour, and therefore could not, or would not, turn their hands to everything as she did. I also engaged a couple of waiters from Dunsford, for I thought it hard to debar the house-servants from a share of the enjoyment; so I gave them a free night too, and only retained the services of my old cook, who, fortunately for me, was 'serious,' and did not go in for 'daffin.'¹

What noble preparations we made! My heart lifts yet when I think of them; for, though the harvest-home is regularly celebrated every year at Hallyards, it has never been gone in for again on the same extensive scale.

For the barn dinner we had that famous condiment, broth,—combining in one all the excellences of both meat and vegetable,—boiled legs of mutton, roasted ribs of beef, rice-puddings made in milk-

¹ Merriment.

basins, and apple-dumplings that looked like small bolsters. At regular intervals the tables were set out with huge bowls of the churned cream that was understood (wrongly, indeed; but what did that matter to the untutored minds who only had a high sense of the eternal fitness of things as they comprehended them, and did not trouble about etymology?) to give the name to the feast; while oatens, crisp and crush,¹ supposed to be the proper accompaniment to the cream, flanked it on either side.

For the dining-room we had what Mrs. Scott called a 'raal handsome denner,'—and I had to take her word for it, not being in a position to dispute her judgment; but there was soup, and fish, and round of beef, and roasted saddle of mutton—which, I have read somewhere, was first discovered by a too inventive genius of the antediluvians, who, in the much-to-be-regretted times when the lords of the creation were content to sit down to their food as they killed it, found out that, by laying his mutton across his horse and galloping on it for an hour or two, it did not stick so much to the teeth as raw meat, and it assimilated more readily; though they did not call it by that name then, not having made a science of gastronomy, and knowing nothing of the flow of the gastric juices, but finding that what they liked made their teeth water, and that they could indulge, at shorter intervals, in the pleasures of the table.

¹ Easily broken, brittle.

Besides the substantials, there was poultry and sweets, pies, puddings, creams, custards, and jellies ; while, for the supper, there was a fresh supply of all seasonable edibles, for it was my desire to have plenty left over to divide among the cottagers next day, so that the children might have a share of the good things, and be in at the end of the feast, which was certainly better for them than the beginning of the fray.

About noon on the eventful Friday, all was in a high state of preparedness ; and I was standing in the pantry contemplating with supreme satisfaction the result of our labours, when I heard my master's step come along the passage to my room. I hastened to him at once, for I knew it was always some important errand that brought him there.

He was standing with an open letter in his hand, looking more put out than I had ever seen him.

'Come in, Miss Forbes, will you ? and take a seat,' he said ; and then he shut the door.

My thoughts flew off immediately to my brothers, especially to that youngest and best beloved ; for I read bad news in Matthew Dale's troubled face—and we are so selfish !

'Is it Jamie?' I had just strength to gasp out.

'What Jamie?' echoed my master, for I had never spoken of my brothers to him, and naturally he knew nothing about them.

'My Jamie ! my brother ! my boy !' I cried, getting very excited, for my master seemed to

hesitate, and be taken aback, as, indeed, he had cause to be, and I carrying on so.

‘It’s Ned,’ he said rather curtly; ‘I wonder you did not think of him! ’

‘Thank God it’s not Jamie! ’ were my next ungracious words; for I had lost all control of myself, and had risen to my feet, from the chair my master had placed for me, and burst into tears.

Mr. Dale looked out at the window. I daresay at that particular moment his opinion of women went down to zero!

‘There’s nothing to make a fuss about—nothing but what we might have foreseen,’ he remarked presently, as I dropped into my chair again. ‘But it’s as bad as bad can be, though Ferrier writes that we may be thankful they have managed to escape a court-martial.’

‘And on the kirn day too! ’ I said; and then, overwrought in mind and body, and tickled by the incongruousness of the two occasions, I burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

‘Miss Forbes! Ann! what is it all about?’ questioned Mr. Dale in his perplexity,—‘you who are always so cool and sensible! ’ and he laid his hand on my head, as if to steady me.

Under the touch—ah, how dangerously sweet and soothing it was!—I grew calmer.

‘Can I leave you a minute, and get you a glass of wine?’ he said. ‘I cannot bring our guests to you; some of them would only make matters worse.’

‘Oh yes, do go! ’ I replied, with quite unnecessary

fervour ; 'it will be the first thing to do me good ;' but whether I meant his going, or the wine he was to bring me, I hardly knew myself.

'Well, you are queer this morning ! I thought your nerves had been at least eleven O.P. You must have been over-exerting yourself, and no one to look after you ;' and he shook his head at me with a half-sad smile as he went off for the wine.

Ned Ryland and his affairs, I am ashamed to say, were the least of my thoughts then. My master's kindness, and the unexpected solicitude he showed about me, touched a deeper chord than aught else the world could bring to me, either of pleasure or of pain ; and had it actually been my brother James who had so narrowly escaped arraignment at his country's bar, I am not certain that even then the notion that Matthew Dale had called me by my name, and laid his hand on my head, would not have been uppermost with me.

Presently he reappeared with the wine ; and, after seeing me take it,—though by this time I had regained my equanimity,—he gave me the letter with the painful details of the dark business by which his nephew had put the finishing touch to his prospects in life. Insubordination, under the maddening effects of ardent spirits, again and again repeated, had necessitated his being put under arrest and sent home by the first chance ; and only by strong influence at the Admiralty, and by Mr. Ferrier applying for his discharge from the service, did he escape public disgrace.

And now, what was to be done with him? 'It would be well,' the friend wrote, 'if Mr. Dale could take a run down to Portsmouth and look after him.'

'I suppose I must go,' said my master. 'The Grahams leave to-morrow, don't they? I could start after that and bring the wretched fellow back with me.'

I wondered that he did not think of sending or taking him to his mother; but that idea was never even mooted. Perhaps he thought poor Ned had been too much with his mother already—perhaps he might fancy I would like to have him under my care.

And so, with sore aching hearts, my master and I—he for his nephew, and I for himself (for what could I do but bear the burden of a sorrow he had tacitly asked me to share with him?)—carried on, to the last moment, our arrangements for the success of our teetotal harvest-home; feeling all the time that, while we were trying to reclaim the drunkard, our own poor inebriate had run on the rocks; and that the finger of scorn might soon be pointed at us, and the mocking words applied—'Physician, heal thyself.'

'Annie, you've gone off desperately since the morning,' said Alice Burnley to me in the course of the day; 'you've been doing too much, I can see;' and I was content to let the girl think so, knowing that for her too the blow would come all too soon. As for my master, he managed to carry so brave a face, and seemed to enter so heartily

into the ploy, that Miss Graham's spirits rose higher and higher, till at last she looked ready to throw herself into his arms, or pitch herself at his head, whichever saltatory feat promised best at the time. I fancy she augured great things from the harvest *fête*; but by what process of induction she brought herself to such a belief, I did not then—I cannot even now—imagine. It must have been one of those hallucinations that come to us sometimes when the wish is father to the thought; and that region of romance—the rosy god's domain—is prolific of such spontaneous delusions.





CHAPTER XVIII.

SCOTT'S SPEECH ILLUSTRATED.



FTER our guests began to arrive, and I got into the full flush of superintending the serving up of two big dinners in as many hours, I had little time for indulgence in either sentiment or sorrow ; and when the dining-room party adjourned to the barn, and the evening contingent dropped in, the gaiety of the scene—much enhanced by a quantity of floral decoration, and the festive spirit awakened by some first-rate music Miss Graham had hunted up in Dunsford—served to lighten, in some degree, the dull, dead pain that two of us, at least, carried within our breasts.

Mr. Dale's speech had gone off without a hitch. Fired by the unhappy tidings of the morning, he had launched forth against intemperance out of a full heart ; but through it all, I could see that the man's convictions agreed with the practice of his life, and that, while he held teetotalism to be a

specific for an otherwise incurable disease, he gave the palm to the temperate man, who achieved a moral victory over his own worst enemy—himself.

‘My friends,’ he said, ‘we are making an attempt to-night to prove that social enjoyment does not in any wise depend on alcohol—in fact, to try if we cannot be very jolly good fellows without even so much as tasting any of the various beverages that are popularly supposed to transform us into that very desirable class. It may be rather an inhospitable notion, but I hope you will judge us rather by what we are than by what we seem, and at least give us the credit of good intentions.’ (Cries of Yes! yes! and cheers.) ‘It might even be called a tyrannical interference with vested rights; but I trust you will be kind enough to perceive that the masterfulness of it is like that of our worthy friend here’ (naming the parish schoolmaster), ‘who does violence to his own feelings when restraining the exuberance of the young under his care—and enforces restrictions, not for his pleasure, but with the design of doing them good.

‘I am no teetotaller myself, as many of you know; nor do I consider total abstinence essential to the well-being of most men. But it is the safeguard of all those who, having become the slaves of strong drink, have lost the power of self-restraint, and for whom it is dangerous to tamper, even in the least degree, with so insidious a foe. Besides these helpless ones, there is another class—they who would scorn the very idea of being

drinkers, who would not knowingly get drunk, but who yet draw the boundary-line too fine ; and the consequence is, that the nearer they approach to it, the less capable are they of discerning it. For them also teetotalism is little less than a necessity ; for then they have a sentry on duty, and so the citadel is safe. If the watchman be drugged, who will sound the warning ? It is hollow mockery trusting to safeguards that no longer exist.' (Cheers, led off by the more intelligent portion of the audience, the rest following suit.)

'But to my mind, these are the radical cases that cry out for radical reform—the offending hand or foot that will not yield to treatment, and that must therefore be cut off. But because my neighbour's limb is diseased, am I to lose the use of my limb too ? No doubt it would afford consolation and encouragement to the "weak brother" to see me crippled like himself. But I think I can be of more use in the world by proving myself a free agent, with all my powers of mind and body unfettered ; and yet, from choice, living a temperate, sober life, using without abusing the gifts of Providence—partaking of them in moderation, or abstaining from them altogether, as circumstances seem to demand.' (Great cheering.) 'All honour then, let us say, to him who, for his soul's sake, binds himself by an oath that he will neither touch, taste, nor handle ; but double honour to him who, with ardent passions, puts a curb upon them—with strong cravings, teaches himself moderation

in all things—and with unlawful desires, brings his mind into subjection; who looks upon the indulgence of any sin as so much unbridled licentiousness, and sets himself to do battle with it, not in the blinding light of publicity, but in the privacy of his own heart, and in the quietness of his closet.

‘We hear often enough of the three R’s, what important factors they are in the race of life, and how greatly the possession of them conduces to our prosperity. But, after all, they are merely elementary to two T’s, which have always appeared to me to be the full corn in the ear, of which the R’s are but the stem and the blade. I refer to Temperance and Thrift—two manly virtues that run some risk of being neglected nowadays, when unseemly indulgence seeks its cure in the stroke of a pen, and a pauper’s dole is the legal inheritance of improvident youth !’ (Cheers from the few rate-payers present.) ‘What is the use,’ asked my master, in concluding his eloquent address, of which I have only given the substance,—‘what is the use of reading, writing, and arithmetic, unless they make us wiser and better men ? But if we have these, and superimpose upon them temperance and thrift, the poorest among us need not seek to call the king cousin, or knuckle to the highest in the land,—a peroration that was received with tremendous cheering; for, having a democratic ring in it, the audience appropriated it at once, and set their seal to it, without pausing to reflect that

it was levelling up the speaker meant, and not the other downward process—a transition so much more easy and natural when viewed from a proletarian standpoint.

After my master had finished, Mr. Graham gave us a few sober, well-meaning words, by way of improving the occasion ; but they wanted point, like all his utterances ; and though he should have been an orator by training, if not by nature, everything he said fell flat.

Then Mr. Scott got up to say his say. I wondered how he would get on with what he called speechifying ; for in ordinary conversation, he never could put two sentences together without an involuntary bull in one of them, or turning the wrong end foremost.

'Leddies and gentlemen, and frien's a,' he began, 'this meeting wuses tae drink—na, no' tae drink ; it's 'total,' he explained, with a somewhat rueful air,—'this meetin' wuses tae—tae—wuses tae wus—na, that winna dae!—wuses tae—'odd sake, lads, I'm gettin' a' whammel't¹ wi't, an' a' for the want o' the drap drink ! That is tae say, no' a' thegither for the want o't—for a tremendous laugh had greeted this admission, and poor Scott wished to clear himself of the implied charge, and put matters on a proper footing—'no' a' thegither for the want o't, but mainly on account that it's no' intil't. I saw fra the first it cudna be dune, though somehow the maister did manage braw and weel

¹ Turned upside down,

wi'oot it ; but tae drink his health whan sorrow a drap there is to drink it in, wad cap the maister himsel', an' it's the warst job I've tackled for mony a lang day — nobbut what I alloo it's a sair mishanter¹ whan a man gets mair nor he can richtly carry, but'— But at this point Mr. Scott's apothegm was cut short ; and how it and the speech would have ended, and how he would have bridged the difficulty that had 'whammel't' him, we were never destined to hear.

Alice and I were seated near the door, round which the younger portion of the revellers had gathered, half in and half out, that they might hear the speeches, and at the same time enjoy the cool air and what little by-play of amusement they could get up among themselves.

Suddenly a sound of scuffling, as of some one trying to force an entrance, reached us ; and it struck me that perhaps, after all, Jamie Bell had managed to make a beast of himself, as Tom elegantly expressed it,—for there were very inarticulate sounds mixed up with loud remonstrances,—when, just as Mr. Scott had given utterance to the sentiment that it was a 'sair mishanter' when a man got more than he could carry, and as if to supply a living illustration of the truth of his words, the obstructionists were forced to give way, and before we could speak or move, Ned Ryland, as drunk as he could well be, was sprawling at our feet.

¹ Misfortune.

Alice first claimed my attention ; for, hearing a great shivering sob at my side, and turning to look at her, I had just time to catch her in my arms, or in another moment she would have been as prostrate as he who had startled her out of her senses, and who, having embraced his mother-earth, now lay making ineffectual attempts to regain his equilibrium.

In less time than it takes to tell it, we—that is, Alice, in a death-like swoon, the unfortunate author of all the confusion, and myself—became the centre of an agitated crowd, and a Babel of senseless suggestions speedily rose on every side. Then my master, spurning Ned with his foot, lifted Alice from my arms to his own, and, turning for a moment, ‘Scott,’ he said, ‘take that poor wretch and shut him up somewhere,’ strode off to the house with his still unconscious burden. Grace and her mother, who had been doing lady patronesses at the far end of the room with great suavity, but had now relinquished that *rôle* for tears and lamentations, in as bad taste as the other, closed up the procession ; while I, deeming I could best serve my master by seeing his nephew safely disposed of, got Scott and one or two of our men to carry him up to an attic room, judging he would be safest there, and best out of the way.

He had sobered down somewhat from the wild frenzied state in which he had burst in on us in the barn, and now seemed half stupid and inclined to doze. I therefore told Tom and James, who were

both there, to undress him and lay him on the bed, and when they came down to turn the door-key.

Having thus, as I fully believed, effectually made sure of our unexpected and unwelcome guest, I went straight to Miss Burnley's room, and found her already much revived, and feeling both ashamed and vexed at having, as she said, made such a fool of herself. But I comforted her by telling her that it was sudden enough to upset any one, and that if she had not been too quick for me, I might have gone off myself. Then we wished Grace to return to the barn; for some of our friends—as the kindest thing they could do, and the shortest way of putting a stop to idle talk—had set the fiddles going, and we could hear the lively strains of the Scotch reel in at the window that had been opened to give Alice air.

At first Miss Graham protested that she was too much agitated to dance; but before she had quite committed herself to a quiet evening, my master knocked at the door, and asked if none of us were going to show face again. In a trice Grace was out of the room, and, with her hand on Mr. Dale's arm, marched off as proud as a peacock to join the dance.

But as we did not look for ease, as little were we to have dignity at Hallyards that night. It was barely half an hour since we had put Ned to bed, thinking and hoping that he would sleep for the rest of the evening. Never vainer hope deluded trusting man! As Miss Graham tripped across the

yard, leaning on Mr. Dale's arm, she turned to kiss her hand to us as we stood at Alice's window, watching her, and what we could see of the dancers and those who passed and repassed to the house; but instead of going through the pantomime she evidently intended, Miss Graham gave a terrified scream, and, dragging her companion round, pointed wildly to the roof above our heads.

At the scream, out trooped the dancers,—surely the neighbours must have thought we had strange ways of entertaining them,—and we at the window saw every eye strained, and many a hand held up in horror; but little could we guess that Ned had got out at the skylight, and was at that moment parading along the roof in nothing but his shirt, composedly looking for a place to descend, at the risk of life and limb, to join the merrymakers.

‘Go back! go back, sir!’ shouted his uncle. A score of uncles would not have turned Ned, who walked deliberately, but with many oscillations, to the lowest part of the roof, then dropping cleverly, as only a sailor could have done, first on to one lean-to and then another, reached the ground in safety, and stood before the startled spectators unabashed.

Most of the women and girls, with little shrieks of offended modesty, fled into the barn, but at the same time contrived, by peeping out, to see a good deal of what was going on. Miss Graham, on the contrary, held fast by Mr. Dale, either with the view of supporting him, or of being supported

herself, under the trying circumstances. From our window, Mrs. Graham, Alice, and I could see all but the principal figure in the foreground—could even, from one corner, which we took turn about, get a glimpse of the extreme outer edge of Ned's airy and only garment, as it fluttered in the wind.

What was to be done with him now appeared to be the anxious consideration of the moment. His gymnastic feats had evidently brought back the strong excitement he had shown at the first; all seemed to hesitate about laying hands on him; indeed, fettered as my master was by Miss Graham's clinging grasp, it was quite out of his power to do more than use his voice in order or entreaty, and to both Ned was equally deaf. Presently he drew nearer the barn, and came full in our view; and then we saw Jamie Bell—of all the others to come to the rescue!—seize a bucket, and, filling it at the horse-trough, come quietly behind the drunken, gesticulating madman, and, lifting it as high as his head, pour the entire contents over him.

'Ye see,' Jamie modestly explained afterwards, 'I hadna been sae seldom half-seas ower mysel' no' tae ken what a gude dookin' wad dae for him.' And Jamie's cure justified the wisdom of his dear-bought experience; for poor Ned seemed to sober down wonderfully after his bath, and, giving himself a shake like a half-drowned dog, he made for the shelter of the house; and his uncle sent Scott and the groom after him, with orders not to lose sight of him again.

Alice, whose colour had hardly returned to her since the shock to her nerves when Ned fell at our feet in the barn, had watched this second scene in the drama with pale lips and shortened breathing ; but when Ned passed out of sight, she fell on her aunt's neck with a little pained cry. 'Oh, take me home, auntie !' she said ; 'I doubt I cannot stand this much longer !'

'You shall go home in the morning, love,' said her aunt ; 'you know our rooms would not be ready for us to-night.'

With a weary sigh Alice acquiesced ; and having persuaded her to undress and go to bed, I sat beside her till she fell asleep.

No Haymakers for me that night ! My bells, after all, did not come true ; nor did my master dance at all, as I afterwards heard. He remained, indeed, with the company, and devoted himself to their comfort and enjoyment, getting Grace and the other girls partners ; but when urged to join in himself, he shook his head sadly, and they forebore to press him.





CHAPTER XIX.

THE CHRISTENING TEA-PARTY.

THE manse party left us on the day following the kirn—a kirn so famous that it became a local era from which minor events were long afterwards dated: like Janet's 'signing of the Solemn League and Covenant ;' or 'the '45.'

I suspect the more cynical among our neighbours had many a quiet laugh behind our backs at our abortive attempt to uphold teetotalism; and who could blame them? All the same, it is a fact that the better-disposed ones gave us full credit for our good intentions, and did not lay it at our door that poor Ned had so signally put his foot through the success of our gathering. Nay more, besides this negative good, great interest was excited on the subject of temperance; and though it did not appear to bear much fruit at the time, I learned many years later that it had given expression to a latent feeling among the farmers around us, that

there was too much drinking carried on by them and their work-people—that at their social meetings too much stress was laid on the enlivening powers of alcohol, and too little attention paid to other and better means of enjoyment.

But so far as we ourselves were concerned, domestic questions excluded the further consideration of more public ones; and the problem we had now to face was—what to do with Ned Ryland?

First, in consonance with our outraged feelings, we tried to cure him with contempt—treating him like a dog, using him as we would hardly have used a brute beast, below which we felt he had sunk. But people like Ned are insensible to shame. Moral obliquity and moral delinquency go hand in hand—which as effect, and which as cause, let the psychologists say if they can.

Then we reasoned with him; and when he was sober—which was just when Jamie Bell and other means of getting drunk failed him—his expressions of remorse and vows of amendment were alike painful and pitiful to hear. But at the first opportunity Resolution must be rewarded with its glass again; and when the drink was in the wit was out, and speaking to him then became simply a case of throwing pearls before swine.

I have mentioned that Ned Ryland only kept sober when Jamie Bell failed to procure for him the means of getting drunk; and indeed, about

this time Jamie began to make himself a greater nuisance than ever—not so much on account of his own bad habits, but by the ingenuity he displayed in pandering to Ned's weakness. The difficulty was to fix the blame where all was so cleverly contrived: for, like all dipsomaniacs, the foul fiend himself could not have come behind the two of them when a supply of whisky was the end in view.

With full suspicion of the evil, but doubtful how to meet it, an event occurred which brought to light an undreamt-of phase of Jamie's character, showing the moral deterioration he had undergone through the debasing influence of drink; and making it no longer a difficulty, but a duty, for the sake of example, on my master's part, to eject the unfortunate creatures from their home.

About the end of harvest, poor Margaret had presented her worthless spouse with a new pledge of affection. A puling, sickly-looking thing it was—and little wonder, with a drunkard for a father and an overworked drudge for a mother. She had laid the two immediately preceding infants in the churchyard; and, added to the grief of losing them, she had to bear about with her the sad reflection that they were both no better than the heathen, so far as the Christianizing rite of baptism was concerned. For the profligate father having been at his worst on each occasion, the minister had taken him on probation before he would dispense the

ordinance to him ; and, ere the matter was settled, the little spirits had winged their way to the spirit-land, leaving only their frail tenements of clay to the care of an inhospitable world that could offer them nothing better than a grave !

But this time Jamie had been on his good behaviour long enough to be in favour with the minister, and had even gone into Dunsford, to bring 'Parliament' to his wife's assistance, without tasting a drop. The boy, therefore, being ushered into the world under such auspicious circumstances, was to have his good fortune further secured by being named after the master ; and a christening banquet, to which Miss Graham and I were invited, —Alice being still too weakly to venture from home,—and the dainties for which were all to be provided from the 'big house,' was to be held in honour of the occasion.

Jamie had been down at the manse making things all right there—which just meant, in plain English, that he was a penitent once more, or at least that he had managed to make the minister think so ; and Mrs. Scott and the poor wife had spent two whole days 'redding up¹ the house,' and making all things clean and comfortable. For the best part of a week there was little else talked of among ourselves ; and when the baptism was publicly announced from the pulpit, every one of us felt that we Hallyards folk had got a lift in the

¹ Putting in order.

world, and that the grins of the Glencorse people, across the gallery, were only a laugh on the wrong side of their mouths, in involuntary acknowledgment of the fact.

On the Monday, however, a rumour went abroad that the manse garden had been broken into, and a number of cabbages carried off; and this new excitement threw the baby into the shade, and set all the gossip-mongers off on a new tack.

The minister was always great on his cabbages, if on nothing else. He ate them himself, and he fed his cows on them in the winter; and he was often advising the farmers in the parish to pay more attention to the cultivation of this, in his estimation, valuable vegetable, which, he said, 'made the milky mothers fill their pails, and beings of a higher order lick their lips.' There was therefore much open sympathy, and still more covert amusement, when his loss became known; and one or two good folks went the length of saying that it would be no thief, but some rather too practical joker, who had robbed the manse garden of its chiefest glories.

Whatever the minister himself suspected I do not know, but he declined to put the matter into the hands of the police, and the mystery was still unsolved when the christening day came round; and about four o'clock a select company, after witnessing the ceremony and duly

admiring young Matt, sat down to a sumptuous tea.

Mr. Graham occupied the seat of honour, close to a roaring fire that must have made him think of the valley of Hinnom; while his daughter and I were thankful to use him as a fire-screen, and keep him well between us and the heat. But Mrs. Scott was, without doubt, the presiding genius of the feast, as she bustled about getting every one served, and at the same time, without being at all aware of her mission, keeping the conversation from sinking into those awful pauses to which entertainments, whether in high life or low, are painfully subject.

She had brought her youngest boy, a very imp of mischief, in her arms—and so long as she kept him there, all went well; but putting him on his feet as she rose from the table on some new service intent, the first thing he set himself to explore was poor Margaret's dresser cupboard, doubtless expecting, deluded youth, that it would contain as many good things as the same receptacle at home.

Under the sturdy fingers the door soon fell open, and displayed to the astonished and delighted child a wholly new and unexpected assortment of playthings. To get his arm round one of the nearest and extract it from the group was only the work of a moment, and the rest, thus set in motion, and being circular, and having no inherent

principle of stoppage within themselves, rushed on in one unbroken stream—a perfect torrent of cabbages bobbing and bounding over the floor, as the upper ones leapt the under, in their haste to regain the lost centre of gravity. A remarkably fine one settled itself serenely at the minister's feet, and he sat and surveyed it with much the same expression as he might have worn had it been the startling apparition of some deceased friend that had suddenly confronted him.

Mrs. Bell simply appeared distressed at the breach of etiquette—having cabbages dancing about the floor before the quality ; and I saw in a moment that she was free from any complicity in the disgraceful transaction. Not so her husband. His guilty face betrayed him at once ; and as the minister, gathering up his scattered senses, rose to his feet, Grace and I made for the door, and never halted till we found ourselves safe within Hallyards house again.

Mrs. Scott told us afterwards that the minister 'didna spare Jamie,'—I could well believe that, knowing how he felt about the cabbages,—and that Margaret sobbed bitterly when she came to understand the true nature of the affair ; but that she never uttered a reproachful word to her husband, but only cried 'that he tell't her he had got them gi'en him, or they should never hae come there.'

Drinking was bad enough, but a liar and a thief

could not by any means be tolerated ; so the miserable delinquent got the choice of marching, bag and baggage, or being handed over to the police. Thus the innocent had to suffer with the guilty, and the poor woman and her worse than fatherless children had to seek, in a new and distant sphere, both home and work.

Mr. Dale, indeed, at the last, relented so far as to offer Margaret an old cottage at the far end of the farm, on condition that she did not allow Jamie to come there ; but this heroine in humble life stuck to her worthless man. She had 'taken him for better and for worse,' she said, and she 'budna break her bargain ! Gin I war to turn my back on him, what wad come o' him ?' and as that was a question to which no practical answer could be given, Margaret had to tramp with her heavy handful of man and bairns. But we got up a small subscription for her among us, and gave it to her with many misgivings that it would go, as Mrs. Scott put it, 'a geyan grey gate.'¹

And Margaret's troubles did not stop with her drunken husband.

'It wad be noucht,' said our spokeswoman, the foreman's wife, 'tae yoke wi' a useless loon, gin that war the end o't ; but tae bring up a 'sma' family, ilka ane o' them mair like their faither than the

¹ A figure of speech, grey being only a little less gloomy than black,

leeve,¹ an' takin' till his ways like young dukes to the water, hauds a woman's nose tae the grun'-stane a' her days.'

And it is too often the case. Vice perpetuates itself in the offspring, while virtue goes a-begging for heirs, and dies out in the first generation !

¹ The rest.





CHAPTER XX.

DRUNK, BUT NOT INCAPABLE.

AFTER Jamie Bell's eviction, we permitted ourselves to hope that Ned Ryland would be easier kept from the indulgence of his besetting sin. But, unless it is that people are always too ready to throw the blame on every evil-doer but their own, I do not think that we had any just grounds of expectation to go upon ; nor did Ned's after-conduct justify our hopes. Resource is boundless when a man's whole energies are concentrated on one end. It is only that we are half-hearted in the pursuit of virtue, while we are wholly given up to evil, that we achieve so much more in the one than in the other. If the votaries of pleasure could inspire the seekers after truth with some of their enthusiasm, then might we look, at no distant day, for a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

After many a weary struggle, to end only in bitter disappointment, it became too certain that

Ned's malady—like any disease when it has become chronic—would yield to nothing but protracted and strenuous treatment.

Then my master told me that he had come to the conclusion that it would be best to send his nephew to a 'drunkards' home,' where he would be kept out of mischief ; and though he feared I might not like the exposure that would follow such a step, and certainly his mother would not be pleased about it, he thought it would be better for the lad himself, and for us as well.

Where was my tongue? was it tied, or tacked? —and my wits? were they wool-gathering?—that I could not up and tell my master that his nephew neither was nor ever had been anything but a trouble and a nuisance to me! But instead of that, I sat looking like the idiot that I was, and left him to suppose, as I had weakly done before, that I was not altogether indifferent to Ned, as certainly he was not indifferent to me.

For the insensate had attempted to resume our former friendship, and take up the broken threads of our intimacy and knot them together again ; but I had strength enough to be firm on that point, and banished him from my room, and told him plainly that I did not consider him fit company for any decent woman to take up with.

Ostensibly to arrange about Ned, in reality to put a veto on his being sent from Hallyards, the next that came of it was Mrs. Ryland's arrival there. More stiff and unbending than ever, more

cold and cruel to her unfortunate son, more distant and haughty to me, she came unwelcomed, as she had left unregretted—came to fight with Ned, and he with her! An aimless, senseless contest, that reminded me of guerilla warfare, and made one almost wish for a regular pitched battle, which, on the principle that when things come to the worst they mend, might have brought about a settled and lasting peace. For it was not Ned's drunkenness alone that they fought over, but whatever the one proposed the other opposed; in fact, they had got so deeply indebted to each other for contradiction and contumacy, that when there were no fresh wrongs to avenge, there were always arrears of old ones standing over for settlement.

It was a miserable time, and nothing to look forward to; for trouble did not improve the Rylands. They hardened their hearts in the day of provocation, and left us, who anxiously watched for the uplifting of the gloomy curtain, without a ray of hope.

Mrs. Scott was the only one, either within or without the house, able to speak or think cheerfully on the painful subject.

'A dead sorrow is better than a living one,' I said to her one day, when we had been more than usually tried with one of Ned's outbreaks; for they lasted so long—the excitement seeming rather to increase than decrease for hours together—that we were often all worn out. So, being in the hopeless state of mind that sometimes ensues from physical

causes, I thus set forth my little faith in doubting accents. 'Time,' I went on to say, 'brings its consolation to the one, while every day adds to the weight of a trouble that is ever with you.'

'But maybe no' for aye!' she replied in her quick, brisk tones; and the words came to me as a homely reminder of what indeed I should not have forgotten; and as I sighed assent, she continued,—

'Ye maun cheer up, an' no' jist fa' dune through yersel'. It's a lang lane that has nae turning, an' whiles it comes whan it's least expeckit.'

I could only hope Mrs. Scott did not prove a lying prophet. At any rate, I went back somewhat heartened to my work, but feeling, at the same time, that the turn in the lane she had indicated could not come a day too soon.

I think the sight of Alice Burnley, too, helped to aggravate us more against the thoughtless, self-indulgent lad. She had never held up her head, so to speak, since the kirn night, and seemed to be fading away without bodily pain or apparent disease; though the hectic cheek, and the sunken temples, and the preternaturally bright eye told too surely of the insidious foe that was working at the core, while the outside showed only an increase of brilliancy and beauty.

I often ran down to the manse, for Alice liked to have me beside her. She did not talk much, but it seemed to please her to sit with her hand in mine, and say a few words as some new thought

struck her. Strange to say, she never spoke of Ned Ryland—never even named his name—never so much as alluded to him. Perhaps the fits of spasmodic breathlessness that were almost her only form of suffering forbade her to indulge in exciting subjects—perhaps, nearing as she was another shore, the land she was leaving was fading behind her, and its misty landscapes losing their attractiveness in view of the better country to which she was hastening.

It was in returning from one of these visits to Miss Burnley that I had an adventure which, though trivial in itself, assumed some importance in its after-effects—just as we not unseldom see the minor incidents of life seeming to dominate our destinies, while events that really promised to be significant of results have turned out (like the kirn night to Miss Graham and me) but empty and broken cisterns!

It was nearing the end of November, and the afternoons were coming to their shortest; but the waning light, as I hurried home from the manse about four o'clock, gave me no greater uneasiness than the fear that I should be late for tea, and so throw my methodical household out of gear. For it is one disadvantage of ruling after the fashion of the Medes and Persians, that when a hitch does occur, it is productive of more inconvenience than under a slipshod government, where it is impossible to do anything out of time, for the simple reason that there is no set time for anything. So I hurried

on, knowing that faithful old Grissel would have the kettle boiling; and that Jane—whose chief fault, or rather misfortune, lay in that she was more of a machine than a reasoning human soul—would be standing with Mrs. Ryland's afternoon teapot in her hand, waiting for me to put the tea into it.

I had just turned off the manse road, at where it joined the more public one from Dunsford, when I came upon our poor Ned, leaning over a gate in what appeared so painful and helpless an attitude, that the thought struck me that he had been suddenly taken with some worse complaint than his usual one, bad as that was,—all the more so, that he had been quite sober when I left home, and had even escorted me part of the way, talking so penitently and sensibly of his weakness, that I almost allowed myself to hope that the turning-point was about to be reached at last. Thrown off my guard by these fancies, and the mutely appealing posture he had assumed, I went close up to him.

‘Ned,’ I said, forgetting in my anxiety to address him as Mr. Ryland, ‘what’s wrong with you?’

‘Oh, it’s Ned now, ish it?’ he said, with a drunken leer; and in a moment he had his arm round me, while he clasped the top bar of the gate with his hand, making me a complete and almost helpless prisoner.

‘I feared you were ill, Mr. Ryland. Pray let me go.’

‘Sho I wash ill, but I’m all shquare now, my

mer—meri—maid ! and you ansh I will get mar—married, and then I'll be bettersh shtill ;' and he actually put his face down to mine, and I felt his hot fiery breath on my cheek.

I had the arm next him free, and I doubled up my fist, and with all my might I planted a smart blow beneath his ear. My hand tingled, I know ; but for him, I might as well have tried to fell an ox with my knuckles ; he merely put my arm down by his side, and drew me closer, to prevent it coming up again. I saw he was just drunk enough to be reckless, and for once I wished he had been drunk enough to be incapable.

‘What a vixshen she ish !’ he said, speaking very thick ; ‘but, blesh her ! it don’t hurt worth mentioning. I’m armour - plated outshide, my hearty ! Woolish infansh, rattle off like hail ! If it washn’t the dry-rot at my timbersh now,’ he added reflectively, as the contrast between the weakness within and the strong muscular frame struck even his muddled brain.

I cannot say I felt afraid of him—only terribly annoyed, and very much divided in my mind as to whether I would take my chance of an ultimate release in my detainer’s own time, or of some one coming along the road to rescue me, but at the same time witness my degrading position. True, there was the impending darkness ; and in the face of that, coupled with Ned’s persistency,—the endless way he held on at things when in liquor,—I at last began to sigh, and sigh in vain, for some

handy knight-errant to take up the case of a very distressed damsel.

For Ned tried to 'pree my mou' every time I opened it ; and as my tongue was the only weapon of defence left to me, womanlike, I could not refrain from using it—though I thereby furnished him with an excuse for his carrying on, if indeed, in his maudlin state, he waited for one.

I imagine we stood thus for half an hour, I making, the while, intermittent attempts to free myself, which did no good, but ill, as my barely responsible assailant only grasped me the firmer ; and my struggles were fast becoming like the last convulsions of a dying hen—a faint flap of the wings, a helpless gasp for the breath that was nearly choked out of me. At length I became really alarmed lest Ned, without at all meaning to harm me, should become my executioner ; and what between exhaustion and indignation, I was nearly half dead, and help apparently as far off as ever.

Suddenly the sound of a horse's hoof coming along the Dunsford road struck on my ear. Here then was aid at last, if I had strength left to invoke it. If not, what was to become of me ? for we were both standing with our backs to the road—looking, I fancy, very like some country lad and lass drawn up for a more than friendly chat.

Nearer and nearer came the sound. Somehow there was a ring of safety in it, if only it did not pass by on the other side ! Would it be some of

our neighbours, or a stranger? But indeed I hardly heeded now. The desire to get out of Ned's clutches was my chief concern, while I felt him tighten his hold, as he, too, became aware of possible interference.

Presently the rider, whoever he was, came well abreast of us. I made a faint little wriggle—for I did not wish to paint Ned's demon any blacker than I could help, supposing it were a stranger; and a scream or a cry would have betrayed the situation at once. But foolish Ned would not desist; and at the fresh and almost cruel hug he gave me, I uttered an involuntary 'Oh, don't!' that brought the horseman to a stand, and caused Ned slightly to relax his grasp. Then I contrived to turn half round, and there sat Matthew Dale, regarding us with an expression of contempt on his handsome, scornful face that nearly finished me outright.

For, as I afterwards learned, he did not at first comprehend how matters stood, but thought that his nephew and I were carrying on our courtship in rather a pronounced and public way.

'Oh, Mr. Dale!—sir!' was all I could gasp; but I got a hand and an arm free, and held them out imploringly. Then the real nature of the affair seemed to flash upon him.

'You infernal blackguard!' he exclaimed, with the nearest approach to bad language I ever heard him use; 'can't you leave the girl alone?'

'Vernal blagart yourshelf!' retorted Ned; 'she ain't your girl.'



CHAPTER XXI.

'HE COMETH NOT, SHE SAID.'

JHAD been observing it of Ned Ryland for some time back, that every fresh outbreak now was telling heavily on his brain, and that of late his excesses had been accompanied by a wild excitement that seemed as much insanity as intoxication. He had not, as yet, fathomed that drunkard's hell in which the bodily senses, no longer guided by the light of reason, play mad pranks on the helpless victims, and terrify them with the most horrible imaginings ; but evidences were not wanting that ere long that dreadful climax would be reached, and that the present stage was but a prelude to the devil's drama in which poor Ned would soon be an impassioned actor.

Lost as he was to all that was praiseworthy, he had always till now maintained a respectful demeanour to his uncle, and even in his most reckless moments he had managed to remember the love and duty he owed him ; but even that last remnant

of better feeling had taken flight, and his insolent retort to words that only exhausted patience could have wrung from one who had been as a second father to him, filled me with consternation and dismay.

What will come next? was the first thought that passed through my mind; but I had not time for a second, till my master was off his horse, and, taking Ned by the arm that still encircled me, but in a feeble sort of way, and while I was still too spell-bound to make use of my liberty, he hurled him away from me with a force that would have sent a sober man spinning, but only made the poor sot sink to the ground like a log at our feet.

I do not know what the incensed uncle did then,—whether he raised him in his arms, or spurned him with his foot, or whether he laid his heavy riding-whip about his shoulders, which, perhaps, might best have met the unhappy case; for, as I could not mend matters by remaining, I struck out for home, and had nearly reached it when my master overtook me. He had mounted his horse again, but drew up beside me and alighted, and, throwing Black Prince's bridle over his arm, strode along at my side, but made no attempt to speak.

'What has become of Mr. Ryland?' I asked, for the silence was intolerable.

My master drew himself up and straightened his neck within his shirt-collar—an old trick of his when strong inner promptings of a somewhat Pharisaical cast demanded outward expression; for,

in spite of the Church's teachings, flesh and blood will clamour for a recognition of superiority, and pride itself that it is not as other men, when brought into juxtaposition with the sinners and publicans of the world. And Matthew Dale was much tempted in this, that out of an upright walk and conversation, strong in the rectitude of a high-toned moral nature, he had little call to sympathize with the weaknesses that lead so many captive.

Feeling that my poor effort to make conversation had been a blunder, and that I was getting no more than my due in meeting with silent contempt, I trotted humbly by my master's side, deeply impressed with my great unworthiness ; but just as I had got myself into this abject state of mind, and as tears of mortification and contrition were rising to my eyes, my companion looked kindly down on me, and observed,—

‘We have surely reached the last stage of endurance now. Why, you look quite pale and tired !’

And, in truth, I was suffering from the effects of the struggle and the excitement more than I was aware of till my master observed and spoke of it. Now, at the tone even more than the words, my last attempt at self-control gave way, and two big drops, weighted with many conflicting emotions, brimmed up over my eyelids and hopped leisurely down my cheeks—provoking witness-bearers to a state of mind I would gladly have kept to myself.

‘My poor lassie !’ said my master ; then he put his arm gently round me and drew me to his side

for an instant. Of course it was done in the most fatherly way, to comfort me; but oh, it did feel different to Ned Ryland's rough clasp! 'Go into the house now,' he went on, 'and get a rest. If it had not been for that worthless fellow'—he muttered to himself rather than to me. 'But there, go and get rested; we can talk about it another time.'

An irresistible impulse came over me: I seized the hand that had caressed me, and carried it to my lips. I wonder did my master think I had gone suddenly mad or worse? A quick questioning look was what I got from him; a face dyed to crimson was my reply, and then I turned and went into the house as he bade me, and tried to rest, but no rest came.

How could I rest? He had held me next his heart, that manly, noble heart (what a refuge for a homeless, friendless soul!), and, if I mistook him not, he had pledged himself to further speech. I might have misinterpreted his meaning,—imagination sometimes runs riot in the realms of reason,—but if I had guessed aright, I knew he was not one to trifle, ever so little, with a woman's feelings, or encourage hopes only to disappoint them. I had observed how he had quietly withdrawn himself from Miss Graham's company when he got an inkling of what the mother and daughter were aiming at; for, as he would never amuse himself with the struggles of a fluttering captive, so neither was he a bird for whom the net would be spread in his sight. Not one to be won and worn by any

unsexed assailant was Matthew Dale ! But what his heart desired, he could go bravely in and seek for, and count it all the dearer that it had not been flung, like some worthless thing, at his head.

So I judged him then, and so I have found him since ; and not him only, but all the best specimens of that queer, unaccountable, unspeakable thing called man.

How, therefore, could I rest, when at any moment I might hear his step coming along the passage ? when, perhaps, that very night a question might be settled that would be the keystone of my earthly journey, dividing the past from the future, yet unifying and perfecting the whole ?—the centre to me of the arc of time,—the apex to which I had painfully toiled upward, but from which I would gently descend, I told myself, by short and easy stages to the shores of a Happy Land, whose bliss had already been foreshadowed by the fulness and sweetness of the human love I had tasted in this !

Alack and alas that Christian folk will go on building on the sand, when, just above their heads, the Rock stands ready, if they would only look up and be true to themselves and to their King !

As I might have foreseen, my master was not in the hurry that I was ; for his pathway, as far as earthly fixity of tenure was concerned, was established and sure, while nightly my ‘ moving tent ’ was pitched so much nearer the possibility of having to bid adieu to Hallyards and all its dear delights.

Interests of both head and heart impelled my

wishes (for among all sensible folks marriage is not all sentiment, neither is it all convenience, but a happy blending of the two), while my master could afford to take a calm and dispassionate survey of the situation, and bide his time, and ponder well his resolution.

I could not see all this at the time, and I waited with strained ear and beating heart all through the afternoon and evening; and as the night wore on, and still he came not, my bright visions faded as had died out the sun from the afternoon sky, and darkness, like a gloomy curtain, wrapt in its shadowy folds the world and me.

I had not read '*Mariana of the Moated Grange*' then; but, strangely enough, I came upon it accidentally very soon after, and it broke upon my mind like a revelation; and I blessed the gifted pen that had given such true expression to the weariness of waiting for one who 'cometh not.' All the same I did not 'give in,' like that disconsolate maiden. I thought she should have shown more spirit, and hushed her sorrows within her own breast, even though it eased her to make her moan. And I know that, as I tossed on my sleepless pillow through that long night, I tried to school my heart to a healthier tone, and to shame myself into an indifference which, I must confess, I hardly reached. For, while fighting with my fate, I could not help feeling that the frost by night consumed me, blanching my cheek, and shrivelling up my youth, and that 'silver threads among the gold' would be

to me like the 'sinew that shrank' to Jacob, after his night of conflict.

For it is not the drawing of blood and the bruising of flesh that give us our deepest scars. The sorrows of the heart are what bow, and bend, and prematurely age us; and many a one has gone down to the grave with the glories of his prime stamped out by the sickness of deferred hope. Even the heroes of the world, who

' Breast the blows of circumstance,'

bring with them from the battle-field many a dent and wale as the price of conquest.

So I set myself to grapple with my 'evil star'; but I cannot say I made much of it. The sight of my master's coat-tail in the morning, as he went to pay his usual visit to Black Prince, sufficed to set my foolish heart off at a tangent again, and I had nearly given in then, and, Mariana-like, cried out aloud.





CHAPTER XXII.

PRELUDES IN A MINOR KEY.

MY adventure with Ned Ryland took place on a Saturday, and on the following day, from the corner of the family pew in the church, where from the first I had occupied one of the least obtrusive seats, I might have studied my master's countenance, and guessed therefrom something of the real state of his feelings towards me ; but mine towards him had assumed a consciousness that made it all but impossible for me even to lift my eyes in his direction. At last I stole a hasty glance ; and there he sat, literally and figuratively looking over all our heads, and apparently forgetting that there were such poor waifs in the world as Ned and I.

And this was the man whose image I had been hugging to my breast—the man who had been coming between me and my wits—who now, far from entertaining any such thoughts of me, seemed

almost willing to allow our last meeting to sink into oblivion !

I began to despise myself for my folly—I, who should have been a sober-minded, steady woman, supposed to be thinking of nothing but my work and the young people (Heaven forgive me, I did not feel so very old myself !) I had under me.

‘ For shame, Ann Forbes ! ’ I mentally ejaculated, —‘ a thousand times, for shame ! Though you are but a servant, have you no proper pride or self-respect left to you ? ’

In this heroic mood I straightened up my back and listened to the sermon. We had a stranger preaching that day—for Mr. and Mrs. Graham and their eldest daughter had all gone to spend the weekend at a manse about fourteen miles distant ; and it was partly owing to their absence from home that I had stayed rather longer than usual with Alice Burnley on the previous day.

I did not greatly admire our own minister’s preaching ; but though I could not much respect him as a man, I tried to honour him for his office, and subtract what consolation and instruction I could from the string of platitudes that slowly uncoiled themselves as he plodded through his work, without a touch of originality or a tinge of fervour to arouse the attention or stir the emotions.

I often wondered to myself how he could be so listless and so cold with such a burning theme to

descant on ; but it was not in him to be otherwise, and I sometimes found myself gazing at him and repeating,—

‘And common was the commonplace,
And vacant chaff well meant for grain.’

But this stranger was cast in a different mould, and his text alone was a sermon in itself to me, who was in a measure passing through the fires ; for (smile not, reader, if you know nothing of such experiences, and are tempted to smile) there are no mere worldly troubles that come nearer the quick—saving, perhaps, when death enters our dwellings to take away our dear ones—than when the death-blow falls on those tender hopes that lurk unexpressed within the trusting breast, and impending desolation threatens the secret shrine, to the horns of whose altar we have bound with the cords of love our pierced and bleeding hearts.

‘Every one shall be salted with fire ; and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt.’

So read the preacher. He seemed a youngish, rather good-looking man, but of his name and his nation I was equally ignorant ; and with the half-contempt that ignorance is prone to indulge in towards the unknown, I set myself, like the Athenians of old, to hear what this babbler would say.

But that I had made a blunder in my estimate soon became as apparent to me as it must have been to ‘certain philosophers of the Epicureans and of the Stoics’ in bygone days, from whose ignorant

worship and superstitious belief the eloquent babbler took his cue, and declared unto them Him after whom they were blindly groping !

Yet, even as I listened, I felt that those same Athenians might have risen up in judgment against me to condemn me, inasmuch as while they were confessedly hearing 'of some new thing,' I, who from my infancy had been brought up, as it were, in a theological workshop,—by which I should have acquired at least a theoretical knowledge of the leading principles of our faith,—seemed only now to be realizing for the first time the absolute necessity of those disciplinary saltings of which the preacher discoursed, and for which he had such high warrant for insisting on.

'Nor are they' (the saltings) 'any vengeance,' he said, quoting from Origen, 'but the just severity of a righteous King, by which the soul is placed at least in the way of purification. For as the priest of old might not withhold the vicarious sacrifice in the more literal times of the ceremonial law, no more can our great High Priest spare us that purgation of fire and of salt which is designed to bring man near to God, give him strength for heroic effort and a loving self-surrender, and make the fruits of victory over sin more permanent, as they are gained through harder toil.'

Then he made plain to us how salt, 'which' (as an old writer quaintly says of it) 'by its acrimony pierceth the lump,' seasons or savours our voluntary offerings; but that every man, in his passage through

this life, whether willing or not, must be salted with fire as sharp, though it may be incorporeal, as that which smoked without the camp of Israel, if ever he is to put off his old nature and put on the new.

‘Some,’ he added, ‘are reached through long protracted sufferings, others by quicker and sharper discipline ; but every one shall be salted with fire according to the measure, the character, and the order of his needs.’

Could I be anything but conscience-stricken when I heard, for the first time, as it seemed to me, of this salting with fire and with salt ? for truly the salting of my sacrifices had been the least of all my thoughts !

How could I doubt that the discipline of which the preacher spoke was necessary for ‘every one,’ when even Alice Burnley, with her purely spiritual nature, had been subjected to the fires of tribulation —in the loss of her lover and the failure of her health ?

And if for her, how much more for me ? who, though a professing Christian, was often trying to live without the Christ ; though owning a Master in the heavens, had my affections centred in one on the earth ; though resting in the Christian’s hope, was yet in quest of a Sangreal, full to the brim of aught but that which could avail me in the hour of need ; and who, far from the self-surrender on which the preacher insisted, had mapped out to myself an earthly paradise, the mere anticipation of which had

come between me and the celestial city, towards which I should have been journeying !

Then I longed to be with Alice, to tell her of my new-found feelings, my half-formed resolutions, my enlightened mind, my convicted heart, in which the throes of a new birth had already given promise of accomplishment. Now I could welcome trouble as the salt that gives the savour, and affliction as the fire that tries every man's work of what sort it is ; for there is no enthusiast like the young disciple, who, with cheerful alacrity, comes to the Master, and asks what He would have him to do ? But alas ! it is not in him to accept, with equal readiness, the cross that is offered him ; that must be wrought out with faith and patience, and much salting with salt and with fire.

But though in this ecstatic state, I had yet in me enough of the earth, earthy, to feel glad that Ned Ryland was not at church that day. In the intervals of his gracelessness there was no more devout worshipper, if one had judged from outward appearance only, in the whole parish than he ; and though it formed one of the redeeming points of his character that, when sober, he did not neglect his duties, it would have added greatly to my embarrassment, and perhaps also to my master's (even though he looked so unconcerned), had Ned put in an appearance—a living reminder of our yesterday's *rencontre*.

But the poor foolish fellow was not fit for either social or religious duties of any kind that day,

and, according to custom, had fallen into the motherly hands of old Grissel, who always took pity on him, and nursed him through his self-inflicted troubles, when every one about the place was disgusted beyond further endurance but herself!





CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE TERRACE.

HAT following Monday morning broke calm and clear; and calm and clear too I felt, as, with fresh vigour from my Sabbath rest, and the new light I had got from the Sabbath exercises, I stepped briskly about my everyday work—for peace of mind brings in its train strength of body, and atmospheric influences bulk largely in raising our mercurial energies.

In the yard, whither my irrepressible activity had carried me, I met Scott, who remarked pleasantly that it was 'a fine day for the Ephesians!'

What particular stake the Ephesians, or even the Galatians, had in the weather that day, I did not exactly see; but being by this time tolerably well accustomed to Mr. Scott's method of expressing himself, I did not pay much attention to him, till he proceeded to ask 'gin the maister had said oucht tae me aboot takin' a shot at them?'

I might have thought our quiet, sober foreman had suddenly become a very bloodthirsty individual, but just at that moment James, the groom, came out of the stable with Black Prince ready saddled and bridled in his hand ; and, while stopping to caress the horse, that for its master's sake was only a little less loved than he, I learned from the lad that Mr. Dale was going over to Broomlands to shoot pheasants with Sir John.

With regard to shooting, though not a landed proprietor himself, my master's territorial leanings and his strong sense of the fitness of things prevented him following the practice of many of his neighbours—namely, renting the land without the game, and then grumbling that he could not have the control of the game as well ! So he rented his farm, and he also rented the shootings along with it ; and then it became a matter of consideration to no one but himself how much grass and green crop the rabbits destroyed, and what damage Scott's Ephesians, and other gentry of the same kind, did him.

Sir John was the grumbler in this case, for it was contrary to all his preconceived notions of landlord right that he had to make so unreserved a surrender in return for the pounds, shillings, and pence my master paid him. But good men were scarce when the Hallyards lease was drawn up, and Mr. Dale was too good a farmer and too snug a man to be thrown overboard for the doubtful

advantage of feeding ground game, or feathered either, at a tenant's expense. In the end, it was actually found to be a gain rather than a loss, for Sir John and his tenant shot together, which amicable arrangement gave another gun when guns were wanted ; and as Scott had strict orders to see to the feeding of his Ephesian friends, Hallyards farm always afforded the best of sport, besides—Matthew Dale being no pot-hunter—a big bag for the big house at Broomlands as well.

Will I ever forget that last Monday of December 18—? Though more than one decade has left its obliterating hand on many concurrent events, that day stands out as fresh as if it had been yesterday ; and I believe it will be one of my latest memories, whether death or dotage comes to seal up the fountains of the past !

My master often dined at Broomlands, but he did not usually wait for dinner when he had been out shooting with Sir John. On these occasions he preferred coming home, where he could have all his home comforts about him ; and, after dinner, a rest on his easy-chair with his newspaper. From what I have seen since these days, I should imagine that any floating notions he extracted from the public prints must have been of a very dreamy character.

That by the way ; but his being out converted our usually punctual dinner into a movable feast, and it became my duty to get from him, before he

started, as near an approximation as he could make to the time of his return.

I therefore watched my chance, and, after Mrs. Ryland had seen her brother mount and start at the front door, I stepped from my own side entrance to ask, would he be home for dinner, and at what hour might we expect him?

He pulled up at once when he saw me; and, while the noble steed pawed the ground with an impatient sense of thwarting, the grand, massive head of the rider was bent eagerly to mine, with a deep, earnest, questioning look in the eyes that always thrilled me through, even with their coldest and briefest glance. Why were they gleaming now with a fire I had never before remarked in them? why had that wistful, tender gaze, with which we had parted on Saturday, come back to them to disturb my new-found peace and upset all my resolutions?

It could not have been more than a minute altogether that we waited at the end of the terrace, till Mrs. Ryland joined us; for of late she had been keeping a sharper eye on her brother than even on her son, and it was seldom now that he and I could ever speak together for two minutes without her chiming in at the third; and yet!—and yet!— As I waited for his reply to my question about dinner, trying to look unconcerned,—though I fear it was not in me to manage it, standing before that unmasked battery,—he stooped to adjust some strap or buckle at his foot (I tell him

now it was all a feint, and faint is the remonstrance he makes to it), and what so natural as that I should step forward to render some help? Our hands met, his closed over mine, and with tell-tale flush I shyly stole an upward glance, which must have been altogether destitute of the reprobating element I more than half intended.

‘My little woman,’ he said, as he firmly held the hand that I fear lay too passively in his, ‘we’ll have an hour together to-night, or my name’s not Matthew Dale.’ Then, stooping still lower, his face, or at least what fringed it, just brushed my cheek, and he was off down the avenue before I had quite realized the situation; only I felt as if in some soft, delicious, blissful dream, from which I might suddenly awake and find it as baseless as a vision of the night.

My awaking was prompt and rough enough; for, looking round, Mrs. Ryland was standing at my side, glaring at me, more like some infuriated animal than a fellow-mortal with hopes and passions of her own, which might, at the least, have led her to tolerate, if not to sympathize with mine.

Wisely, she contented herself with withering glances. Words might have stung to the quick, and the sharp pain might have wrung forth some sharp expression of it; but savage looks fell harmless, and did not call for any return in kind. So I gave her back smiles for frowns, as I turned on my heel and went into the house; and if

old cook had not been so hopelessly obtuse, she might have noticed a ring in my voice and a light on my face that she had never heard or seen there before, as I gave her my orders for the day.

For a gay heart beautifies the dullest countenance; and my heart was beating audibly within my breast, sending the rich warm blood tingling to my cheeks and shining through my eyes. Surely now, ere I slept that night, my troth would be plighted to the man who had never had a rival in my breast; and now he was coming to take the crown that was waiting for him—a woman's first and last and lifelong love.

In the afternoon I would run down to the manse and spend an hour with poor, suffering, lonely Alice. How utterly sad her state, contrasted with my bright future! How sad and poor, indeed, any state at all, set side by side with mine! I would have to try and comfort others even as I was comforted; and as I did not think of trying my hand on Mrs. Ryland, there was only Alice to see to, till I could minister to my master—'My lord and master now!' I said; for never white slave donned her chains so eagerly as I, and by anticipation I had already thrown myself at Matthew Dale's feet in an ecstasy of happiness, and my only concern was how to get through the intervening time till I could realize my dream of bliss.

I do not think I ever spent so unsettled a day,

or tried so many plans for killing time, that emphatically declined to be put to sudden death, but kept dragging its slow length along, do what I would with it. From mental work to manual labour; from my pen—of which I was always fond, and now threw down in despair—to an uncalled-for attack upon a window that would not show speck or stain to justify my efforts. Then to try the most sensational reading on which I could lay my hands; but that was more than a failure, and I threw aside the book in deep disgust. What to me were the boldest flights of fancy compared with the vivid realities of my own situation? What hopes and fears and joys and griefs of others could stir me, whose pulses even now leapt to the coming of him who made my world? No! whatever men may do, it is not when our lives are already filled with excitement that we womenkind fly to stimulants; it is rather when the wheels of our being are clogged by disappointment and our hearts are sick with deferred hope, that we try in our blind folly to create, by artificial means, a miserable imitation of what is but in itself a hollow mockery.

Three o'clock came at last—the hour at which I had arranged to go down to the manse. I seemed to tread on air as I flew along the well-known path; for the rapid motion consorted with my restlessness, and from the crown of my head to the sole of my foot I felt as if all my joints had been newly oiled and set agoing.

Little chance was there for Alice now to hear of the salting with fire and with salt; far from me already were the sacrifices and the offerings to which but yesterday I had clung in my desolation. I would veil my happiness, though, I said to myself, that the palace of delight I was about to share with my beloved might not deepen the gloom of the dark and silent tomb to which my friend was but too surely hastening; while, could I have been disenchanted by a glance into some mirror of truth, I would have known myself to be poor, and miserable, and wretched, and blind, and naked, in comparison with her, 'all glorious within,' who would be 'brought unto the King in robes with needle wrought.'

It was a beautiful December day; and that, doubtless, had much to do with the elasticity that made me trip along as lightly as if, instead of corporeal matter apt to get out of gear and subject to heavy fits of dulness, I had been made of India-rubber.

A slight frost just crisped the ground and cleared the upper atmosphere, while the haze that lay low along the horizon encircled the earth with a fleecy covering, and cast a glamour of delicious softness over the landscape—just a day to be made a pet of; for it was more than probable that on the morrow gloomy winter would resume her sway. Alas! and alas! well for us that we know not what a day may bring forth—well for me that no premonition of coming ill obscured my brief and happy

day ; for it was long ere I knew another, and, like the December weather, clouds and darkness soon overshadowed all.

Alice had fallen off since my last visit. The slight frost that infused new life into my healthy frame brought only an accession of suffering to her —a lowering of vitality, an incessant tickling cough, that made it difficult for her to speak without exciting it ; and yet, with that quickness of observation which comes to those who are much thrown back upon themselves in the weary days of illness, she was not slow to remark the happiness that would not be masked.

‘Ann ! what’s come to you ?’ she asked, with her sweet, patient smile, as she tried to keep down the cough and make me believe she was no worse than usual. ‘There’s more than the walk beneath those bright eyes !’

I turned to the mirror on Alice’s dressing-table to smooth out the tell-tale creases and tone down my officious orbs ; for it seemed little less than cruel to parade my happiness before one who, to my earth-bound vision, was a prey to sorrow and distress. So I did my best to look unconscious. I only half succeeded, or rather, I succeeded too well, and overdid it.

‘Now, Annie, don’t try to act the hypocrite. It’s a double disgrace, you know, for you are not one really. Sit down and confess at once.’

I sat down as she bade me, and took her hand in mine. Ah, how thin and wasted it looked ! At

the sight there came over me one of those sudden spasms of emotion,—I suppose it was just another outcome of my excitement,—and I threw myself over Alice's bed and sobbed as if my heart would break.





BOOK III.



CHAPTER XXIV.

DIREFUL TIDINGS.

ALICE let me weep my fill. When I could see her for my blinding tears, she was lying with her preternaturally large bright eyes fixed on me ; but she neither spoke nor wept. It is wonderful how calm people come to be in sickness—how little moved they are by what goes on around them ! Observing all, they seem but slightly affected by anything ; while the anxious watchers put themselves to needless and endless pains to stand between them and every disturbing influence.

Mr. and Mrs. Graham and their daughter Grace were still absent from home on that eventful Monday afternoon, but were hourly expected ; and I resolved that I would get off before their arrival. To-day, of all days, I did not care to encounter them ; but just as I had composed myself and begun to talk to Alice in a rational way, a knock at the door was followed by the entrance of the

manse housemaid, with the usual polite request—
‘Please, ’m, would you speak?’

I hurried out of the room, taking the girl along with me ; for, whatever the subject on which I was requested to speak,—and my heart was beating faster already,—Alice was not to be disturbed.

‘It’s your Jessie, Miss Forbes ; an’ she’s fair oot o’ breath wi’ runnin’, an’ ye’re to get home quick.’

‘Where is Jessie?’ I asked. I saw in the girl’s face that she had bad news for me ; but I put them from me and asked for Jessie.

‘In the kitchen,’ she replied ; and to the kitchen I hastened.

Jessie was sitting at the end of the table, with a very awe-stricken face ; and the manse servants were all standing round her, open-mouthed, as if ears alone were insufficient to take in the details she was giving them. Before I entered I heard her speaking rapidly and firmly, but at sight of me her composure gave way, and after a few ineffectual gasps she threw her head across her arm on the kitchen-table and sobbed aloud.

I went up to her and shook her. ‘Dairy,’ I said, ‘if you have brought a message for me, say what it is at once.’

My stern tone brought her round in a minute, and she found her voice.

‘It’s the maister—he’s deein’!’ she exclaimed. ‘At ony rate, that wasna what I was to tell ye ; but it’s far ower true’—when another burst of

sobbing deprived the girl of further utterance. But what more was there to hear?

‘Don’t alarm Miss Alice,’ I said to the woman in a queer voice, that sounded strangely unlike mine. Then I rushed out at the kitchen-door, hatless and jacketless,—for I had left them in Alice’s room,—and sped along the road for home.

I do not know how ever I got there. I have an indistinct remembrance of meeting the Grahams somewhere near the manse, and of them trying to stop me; but I dodged them, and got clear away, though I have an impression that Grace jumped down from the back of the dog-cart and ran after me for a little, but gave up the chase in despair.

Neither do I know who gave me the details of that dreadful night, or how or when I first heard them. I might never have been told by human tongue at all; for from the moment poor Jessie sobbed out the words, ‘It’s the maister—he’s deein’!’ I seemed to see him stretched on the ground covered with blood, and the black horse coming home riderless. I was wrong there, however, for Black Prince was found standing guard over the ruin he had wrought; and, as Scott said, ‘The beastie seemed as sair put aboot as the buddies, whan he fand the maister didna rise and come awa’.

I may have dreamt it—I cannot, never could tell; but at any rate, though events in their natural sequence were mixed up in my brain, I got a tolerably correct idea of them in a general way; and, instead of fearing a gun-accident, as was most

natural under the circumstances, I knew well enough that, the sport over, Matthew Dale had been hurrying home to carry out his purpose of the morning, and in the eagerness and preoccupation of his mind he had urged Black Prince beyond his speed ; and the willing beast, not so young as he had been, stumbled and fell, not only bearing his hapless rider to the ground, but burying in the dust the fulfilment of his and my hopes.

Alas that the pity and the pride of it were alike cast down at the feet of the leveller Death, from within whose mocking shadows all my bright expectancies already looked like some pale phantom of a vanished past ! At least so for the moment it seemed, when I entered the dining-room at Hall-yards, and, blind to everything else, saw only my idol,—motionless, speechless, to all appearance dead,—bruised and soiled and bloody,—just as they had carried him home from the roadside where they found him, with Black Prince's bridle still in his clenched hand, and the poor brute—his own knees broken and bleeding—standing whinnying beside him.

How did I restrain the impulse that prompted me to rush up to the sofa where lay the most of what earth held dear to me, and throw my arms around the senseless form of him within whose arms I had trusted to find a refuge, but which would never now be raised to clasp me to his breast ?

Was it because Mrs. Ryland was standing by, and that her cold, unsympathetic look acted on me

like a spell and froze me into stone? For as sympathy unlocks the floodgates of feeling, so the want of it turns the key on our emotions and shuts them up as behind an iron barrier through which they cannot pass.

But not so easily influenced was poor, warm-hearted, impulsive Ned: utterly regardless of his mother's presence, and neither giving to nor receiving comfort from her, he had thrown himself over the end of the sofa at his uncle's feet, and was blubbering in most unmanly fashion.

Nearly all the servants were standing round, and a goodly contingent of the cottagers as well; but no one spoke or moved as I entered, for to them I was simply the housekeeper, whose duty it was to give orders and direct affairs, but with no greater interest in this sad catastrophe than the youngest among them; for they had all, with one or two exceptions, been longer at Hallyards than I had. How little they knew, poor, honest, faithful, loving hearts! and yet their grief all put together would only have been as a feather-weight compared to mine.

The doctor had not yet arrived, but I learned somehow that James had been despatched for him; and I had presence of mind left to me to go in search of towels and bandages and sponges, and had the room—his room—made fit for the sad use to which it was now to be put,—would it be a death-chamber cold and white? or the scene of a struggle back from the gates of the grave, warm

with returning life and bright with the hope of recovery? We could not tell till the doctor came, and in the interval I busied myself folding away his everyday suit (ah me! would he ever wear it again?), and the various odds and ends people keep lying about them, to wring the hearts of mourners when the vanished hand will handle them no more.

Trying enough work it was, but better than inaction; and so long as I fancied I was doing some good, I steeled my heart to bear it. At last I was compelled to stop for sheer want of more to do, when, just as I was turning to leave the room, I caught sight of a face and figure in the looking-glass, so white and old and bent that I did not recognise it. Stopping to stare at it, I saw it open its mouth, and I heard, or fancied I heard, the words—‘Every one shall be salted with fire.’

Then I knew that my senses were leaving me, and I rushed into one of the spare rooms and shut the door—that at the least, if I went mad, or fainted, or died, I might not add to the trouble already in the house, or distract attention from him who was dearer to me than my own life.

I do not know what happened to me in that room. The last that I remember was throwing myself across the bed and wishing for old Nurse Janet, and then all became dark.

The next sight I saw was old Janet herself sitting at my bedside, in my own room, busy by the light of a solitary candle, that brought out in

strong relief a long white garment at which she was steadily working.

Immersed in her occupation, and occasionally holding it up with a critical air, while the pins that bristled like a *cheval de frise* around her mouth testified to her industry, Janet had forgotten her charge. And as I lay looking at her, too apathetic to wonder why she was there at all, it became clear to me that she was either stealing a march on death, or that the grim king had already made good his footing in some other quarter of the house.

‘Who’s dead?’ I managed to ask in a weak, faint voice.

Janet started to her feet, and hastily pushing her seam under the bed, and by a dexterous movement transferring the pins from her mouth to her bosom, she peered at me through her spectacles, and exclaimed, ‘Sirs, bairn! are ye comin’ roun’ after a?’

My mind was perfectly clear—clearer than Janet calculated on, or she would have been more guarded both in her words and her actions. My memory too—a blank so far—was yet acute enough to strike the keynote of the mournful cadence on which it harped in doubtful strains, as if some feeble fingers were touching a long disused instrument, till at last, ‘It’s the maister—he’s deein’!’ broke like a ringing chorus over it all.

‘Lift me up, Janet,’ as I made an ineffectual attempt to raise myself. ‘Is the doctor come?’

I cannot be lying here and things wanted, and not one to do a hand's turn but me.'

'Dear sucks, bairn! lie still an' rist ye. The doctor'll be here by grey daylight, an' ye maunna steer nor speak till he sees ye.'

'Is he lying all dirt and blood yet?' I whispered hoarsely.

'Wae sucks! she's waverin' agen,' muttered Janet to herself; then, turning to me, 'Wheesht, wheesht, hinny! there'll be nane lyin' sae low as yersel' gin ye dinna keep quait an' fa' ower again.'

In truth, by this time, small as my effort had been, I was glad enough to obey Janet's orders and close my weary eyes; but, happening to reopen them in a minute or so, I saw that she had resumed her work, and that the fortalice was already bristling again; so, watching and wondering in the weak, feeble way that remained to me, I fell into a quiet sleep.

It was the doctor feeling my pulse in the dawn of the morning that next aroused me. Janet's candle had died out or been extinguished by that time, and her work was laid aside, and the doctor and Mrs. Ryland were talking of me when I next became conscious of human companionship.

'She has rallied wonderfully,' I heard him say; and it was the lady's voice that replied, 'When you have finished here, you will look in on my brother again.' And it was thus I came to know that Matthew Dale was still in the land of the living; and with a thrill of thankfulness I seemed to gain

new life myself on hearing there was something still worth living for.

As yet I had hardly begun to reflect that my illness must have been of some standing, else why was Janet there? and my strength, it could not all have departed in a few hours, or even days, and I found I could not stir hand or foot, or even turn my head on my pillow.

As Mrs. Ryland left the room immediately, without replying to the doctor's remark about me or attempting to address me, Janet struck in. 'Ou ay,' she said, 'praise be blest, she's warstled¹ through sae far; but aboot the turn o' the nicht I fairly thought she was soughin'² awa'—an' no a threed o' deid-claes by her, sirs! it's awfu', the thoughtlessness o' the young folk o' this preesent. But gin she leeve through the day, she's no hae that tae compleen o'; an' supposin' she disna need them noo, they'll aye be ready come anither occashun.'

I saw the doctor put his finger to his lip; and, though he could not cut short Janet's explanation, she took the hint and stopped just as she was about to pull out a drawer to exhibit her handiwork. Possibly it struck her, from the doctor's manner, that there might be more reassuring sights for an invalid than their last dress getting made before their eyes. At all events, I never saw her at it again; but some time later—I must not say how much—I found a parcel done up in a newspaper in that

¹ Wrestled, struggled.

² The breathing of a person in deep sleep.

same drawer, and, on opening it, I beheld what worthy Janet would have called 'a fu' suit o' deid-claes.'

And though—thanks be to Him who holds the golden keys—they have not been needed as yet, poor old faithful Janet, whom these hands arrayed for her last long home some years ago, failed not to redeem her gruesome promise, that, when the grim king came to claim me, I should not have to 'compleen' (as she quaintly put it) of the want of the outward trappings at least—and beyond that no human hand, however friendly, can go.





CHAPTER XXV.

LEAVING HALLYARDS.

SWEET to the limbs that have been racked by pain, and the veins that have throbbed with fever, are the first soft stirrings of the new life that marks the turning-point of illness safely past,—when each new day brings with it a fresh accession of health and strength, and languor becomes a luxury in which there is nothing to do but lie still and get well.

How supreme at such a time seem the blessings till then so lightly valued! With what glad and grateful psalms is the return to health welcomed, that, till lost, had never evoked a strain of praise, or called forth the breath of thanksgiving!

But to me this blessed feeling was much marred by the torment of a mind devoured by anxiety and ill at ease—keeping all my faculties at a high-strung pitch the while my body was too weak to resist the inevitable reaction. Mental and bodily repose was the one thing I needed; and, tossing

wearily to and fro on my sleepless pillow, with not a soul to whom I could unburden my mind, was the one thing I could not obtain. If I could have talked my troubles over, it might have eased my pain ; but friendless folk, such as I was then,—for though Janet did her best to nurse my body, she would have scouted as ‘narvishness’ the mere mention of mental distress,—must take the buffets of fate as they come. Not for me was the sting of misery blunted by the veiling tenderness of comforters. Not for me was the sympathizing bosom bared, that I might lay my stricken head thereon, and feel the pain half dulled by the sweetness of the shelter. I had to bear my troubles alone and fight my battles unaided, while I lay, bound hand and foot, turning over, with a baffled sense of incompetency, many a scheme of deliverance.

And many a cruel blow I got during those days ; for old Janet, anxious and kind as she was over me, had not learned that one of the cardinal points of good nursing consists in keeping the sick-room quiet. And the maids, under pretence of seeing what they could do for me, were often coming in to discuss with Janet the current topics of the day —none the less briskly that I could take no part in the talk.

Had they brought me word that my master was dead, I could have gone in imagination to his grave and wept there, and told myself that he who lay beneath was only a little more lost, but none the less loved, than when he trod the earth, and

kept my poor weak head vacillating between hope and fear. But love and hope and fear were all wrecked now ; for the news they brought me was, that for the last six weeks Miss Graham had been helping Mrs. Ryland to nurse my master, and—

‘They maun ettle marriage dootless,’ was old Janet’s comment ; ‘a young lass like her wad ne’er be waiting on a fremmit¹ man, gin there warna a wadding to come o’t.’

And I accepted Janet’s dictum without a distrustful thought. Had I been going about on my feet and my head up, I might have sifted and weighed evidence ; but, lying weak and ill, my brain took on the impression of every word that reached me with the unquestioning trust of a little child.

So, forgetting the proneness of the uninstructed mind to indulge in conjectural detail, I drank in much mischievous gossip ; and it fell on my ears like the knell of doom, that he, my all but promised husband, was, at his sister’s bidding,—for I could not explain the turn matters seemed to be taking otherwise,—to prove false to himself and me ; and not one to raise a hand to help us nor a voice to forbid the wrong-doing !

As I lay thus on the rack, as it were, a message was brought to me from Mrs. Ryland, to ask, could I sit up for a little, as she wished to speak with me on a matter of some importance ?

Instinctively the female mind clings to blankets. In seasons of difficulty—more frequently under

¹ Not related.

apprehension of danger—to get below the blankets is, with many of my sex, a foremost thought. In thunderstorms—in monetary crises—above all, when, in the silent hours of night, the most unlikely sounds betoken 'a man in the house,'—not to the poker, or even to a walking-stick, will the average woman fly; but she will duck her head among the blankets, and, but for a feeling of suffocation, a great sense of safety will pervade her imagination.

So I elected to remain among the blankets, and sent Mrs. Ryland word to that effect.

I think I see her yet, walking up my room with her slow and stately step, every one of which fell on my heart like lead; for I read my fate in her face, and knew without telling that my pleasant days at Hallyards were over, and that I was homeless once more.

With slight greeting, she dashed into her subject at once. 'Are you able to be moved yet, Mrs. Forbes?' she asked, in her most uncompromising voice; and then, without waiting for the answer, which was not too speedily forthcoming, she continued somewhat excitedly: 'You know you have been lying here for six weeks, with the best of nursing and medical attendance; and, considering the trouble in the family, and that your master is at present so much of an invalid, I hope you will see it to be your duty not to trespass longer on his goodness.'

Had she spoken kindly I might have wept—for kindness melts the heart; but the cool business

tones, and the drought of the fever that was still lingering about me, made me feel like the dried-up bed of some mountain stream ; and, with my tongue all but cleaving to the roof of my mouth, I just managed to gasp out,—

‘Does the doctor think I can be moved?’

Bold and unscrupulous as Mrs. Ryland was, I saw she durst not venture on a direct reply. For there is a kind of morality, not uncommon in the world, which forbids a black lie, but never halts a moment at a white one ; and before she even opened her mouth, I knew her answer would be a trumped-story, with a molecule of fact to a mountain of fiction.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I believe he thinks that you ought to go home as soon as your strength permits.’

My home ! and my strength ! Alas ! I had neither. But what recked the heartless woman beside me of that ! Her chief concern, I saw, was just to get quietly rid of me ; and after that, I might go to the dogs, or take any other route that suited me.

‘I hope to be fit for my work before long,’ I remarked. ‘When I am able to get up, I will speak to my master.’

‘You will not do that, I can assure you,’ replied Mrs. Ryland, with some heat ; ‘at present the least excitement is forbidden for my brother ; and I am managing for him—till—till—in short, there is a change in contemplation, which it is quite unnecessary to discuss at present.’

It must be true, then, I thought, old Janet's surmise ; for what else could Mrs. Ryland mean ? And though losing my place was bad enough, it sank to insignificance before a loss that involved all earthly good. But, though weak and ill, and unequal to a discussion as I was, I did not intend to give up my place, even as housekeeper, so easily.

'It was Mr. Dale who engaged me,' I said ; 'and I must remain at Hallyards till he has no further need of me.'

'Need of you !' she retorted ; 'what do you suppose you are doing for him now ?'

'I will be up and doing ere long.'

'Let me tell you,' she said, 'that if you were about at this moment, you would only be hindering the peace and unity of the household, and thwarting your master's plans by your persistent conduct. And do not imagine that I am speaking without authority,' she went on, as I lay too feeble and exhausted to stop her ; 'and if it is a question of money with you, my brother will do all that is right in that respect,—though I fancy your lawful claims on him now will be trifling.'

'Much she knows about my claims,' I thought ; but if my master was content to ignore them thus, what could I do ? Perhaps, after all, he had sent her to try and get rid of me. Perhaps it was only some impulse of the moment that led him to clasp my hand, and bend his face to mine, and assign a meeting for that fatal night. And now that he had reconsidered the matter, there was to be an end

of it ; or, what was even more probable, his sister had got over him, when weakened from the effects of his accident, and got his assent to my being turned from the door.

It was all a tangled skein—too knotted for me to unravel ; and, wearied and worn, for one moment the blood rushed over my pale face, and then as suddenly flew back again, leaving it whiter than before ; the eyelids, hot but tearless, involuntarily closed ; and even my arch-enemy saw I had got enough for the time.

After that I had a relapse, and a second struggle for life,—which might have turned the scales in my favour, but that my foe was too determined and implacable to allow herself to be moved by any considerations, however serious ; and I daresay she never exactly realized how nearly she had had the stain of murder on her hands. And when I had somewhat recovered lost ground, Janet, without consulting me, and never guessing that she was playing into Mrs. Ryland's hands, one day took it into her head to ask for a covered carriage to take me to her own home.

‘She'll ne'er win ower't here !’ she said to only too willing ears : ‘ilka day she mak's a wee, she jist fa's back as much the neist ; aiblins the change an' the quait might help her.’

Had Janet asked for a chariot of fire, and Mrs. Ryland could have supplied it, I doubt not it would have been forthcoming ; but the fly from Dunsford sufficed for my humble wants ; and two

days thereafter I passed over the threshold of the house that was to have been mine, leaning on old Janet, my only protector now.

What a different fate seemed awaiting me only two short months before! Bridal gauds to deck me, and the strong arm of a new-made husband to lean on, as he and I walked gaily forth to take our pleasure, the best of which would be the coming back the happy mistress of that dear home, the lifelong companion of its beloved master! Now, almost driven forth—without hope of return, helpless and feeble—my betrothed, as I might call him, to be given to another—and not even Janet knowing half my sorrows!

Was it by arrangement, or was it because arrangements failed, that I got a brief glance of Matthew Dale seated on one of the garden chairs near the door, with Miss Graham hovering round him, just as I had so often seen them? The conspirators had reasons both for and against my seeing him; and certainly he had a dazed look as he lifted his hat to me in the old fashion, while Grace Graham made me a stately and distant bow, which was really foolish of the girl, after all that had come and gone.

How well I would have liked to rush up to my master, regardless of them all, and throw myself at his feet, and clasp his knees, and beseech him to speak up for himself and me! But physical and mental effort were alike impossible to me; and I went on, or rather was dragged by Mrs.

Ryland, like a sheep to the shambles, and not even a cry from my bleeding heart to scare her from her ruthless butchery.

About half a mile from the house, but not above a quarter as the crow flies, the public way to Dunsford ran through a lovely dell, at the bottom of which wimpled the Hallyards burn. Up at the house, it was at its clear purling stream we watered the horses, bleached our linen, bathed in its shady pools in summer, or in winter flew along their glassy surface on our iron-bound clogs—skates had not become common then. To the cleugh we resorted when in contemplative, or amorous, or æsthetic mood; for never did nature frame a sweeter or more sequestered spot, even though its privacy was invaded by the king's highway.

Encircled on the one side by precipitous, on the other by sloping banks, where the gnarled oaks that fringed them were in turn fringed themselves by the pendent ivy, the glen was completely shut in, saving where the road found entrance and exit. A bridge, rustic in its simplicity, spanned the burn, and on its low parapet many a weary traveller rested, and probably rose to pursue his journey a happier and a better man.

But to-day by me the cleugh would have been unnoticed but that Ned Ryland was sitting on the bridge with his arms folded, and hailed the carriage as we passed.

‘Hold on there!’ he cried, coming to the

window. 'So you're taking a carriage-drive, Miss Forbes?' making an ironical bow.

'She'll no' be a hair the waur o' that,' shouted Janet back; while I asked bluntly, 'What are you doing here?'

'Meditating among the tombs,' he replied.

'I cannot read riddles to-day, Mr. Ryland.'

'Oh, I forgot,' he said; 'but come out, I have something to show you.'

'I fear I cannot manage that either.'

'Then you'll rue it to the last day of your life. See, I'll help you;' and before I knew, he had me in his arms, and in another minute I was lifted from the carriage right across the road, and set on my feet on a bit of level ground that skirted it, and which had evidently been newly disturbed.

'What have we here?' I asked, panting—I was so weak still.

'Cannot you guess?'

'Oh, Mr. Ryland, spare me!' I cried, hardly knowing what I dreaded, but feeling that the freshly-turned earth was hiding some secret in which I was interested.

For sparing, Ned put his arm round me to support me, and I observed that his eyes were full of tears.

'Is it Black Prince?' I asked, while my tears fell thick and fast.

'Is it not a shame?' was all his reply.

'Who did it?'

'Oh, you need not ask! If my uncle had been himself, it would never have been done,' he replied.



CHAPTER XXVI.

MY NEW PLACE.

IT is strange how trivial thoughts mix themselves up with our deepest emotions. It came to me like a dream, some time afterwards, that I had seen Mrs. Graham's face at the carriage window that dark day—which was in reality a very fine day—I left Hallyards, and her lips moving, but I could not recall any words. The sight of that other face lifted to mine in apparent half-stupid wonderment had thrown everything else into the deepest shadow.

Not that I really cared whether Mrs. Graham had been a spectator of my departure or not; but it perplexed me, and my mind was in that feverish state, partly through weakness, that I could not always control my thoughts, or direct them into any profitable channel.

So when I became a little stronger, I one day asked Janet if Mrs. Graham was actually there seeing me off, or had I imagined it?

'Oh, 'deed ay!' she replied drily; 'atweel was she! an' she cam' forrit an' houpit ye wad enjoy the dreeve, jist as if ye had been gaun aff on a pleasure-jaunt—the auld whigmaleerie!¹ I could thole the 'tither madam better nor her, for ye aye saw the warst side o' her; but ye ne'er cud tell what was ahint Mistress Graham's becks an' boos an' palavers!'²

Janet and I exchanged looks, for at that moment she of whom we spoke passed the window of the little parlour at Blackadder, where I had again found refuge; and I daresay the old proverb flashed through both our minds—'Speak o' the deil and ye'll see his tail.'

Presently she came in, ushered by Janet, smiling and gracious as usual, inquiring tenderly after my health, hoping the change had done me good, and even going the length of saying how much they all missed me, both at Hallyards and the manse; but with old Nurse's last remark ringing in my ears, it cost me some effort to reciprocate her civilities.

Alice had sent her—thoughtful, loving Alice!—sent her to offer me a home at the manse and a place in her sick-room for a little while. How temporary a place it would be, we all knew too well; but all the more on that account I would not say Alice nay. I was pretty strong again, and perfectly willing to meet with some light work, for it had become a painful thought with me, above and

¹ Full of whims—a term of contempt.

² Curtsies, and bows, and meaningless talk.

beyond the sickening sorrow that dwarfed every other, that my brother James's college expenses might soon be more than I could meet, and his professional career be thus indefinitely thrown back again.

It rather surprised me that neither Mrs. Graham nor Grace should have taken up the duty of nursing Alice instead of handing her over to a stranger's care ; and I think the elder lady's conscience was not quite at ease on the matter. 'Who excuses himself accuses himself,' and she became her own accuser by offering some halting excuses which plainly said that of good reason there was none. All the same, I do not think that either of them possessed the beautiful gift of nursing—not to imply, by any means, that I had it myself; but I think, without becoming my own trumpeter, I might go the length of saying that at least I had a turn for it.

Another ten days saw me at the manse, fully installed as Alice's nurse and companion, liking my work well, and feeling quite at home with my sweet young mistress. But the Grahams and I never would get on, so we kept as much apart as circumstances permitted ; and from afar I watched the wooing. But such a wooing as had never been seen ! Mr. Dale never came to the manse ; his health, I understood them to say, kept delicate—though who of them said it I cannot remember ; but Miss Graham went down to Hallyards nearly every day, and Ned Ryland almost as regularly

escorted her home. Not quite to the door, certainly, at which I rather wondered ; but, to my still greater surprise, they always parted at a laurel bush just within the manse gate, a view of which I had from the window of Alice's room, where I sat at work.

Grace could not have known of this little vista, or she would probably have been more particular in conducting her leave-takings with her future nephew ; but it was no affair of mine, so I said nothing, except to ask myself, 'What's in the wind now ?'

From what I could gather, Ned had been steady ever since his uncle's accident, and for the present had quite given up his drinking propensities. Grace Graham herself furnished the information one day at dinner, when Mrs. Graham, in a fit of maternal solicitude, wished her daughter to take a glass of wine.

'Not for the world, mother !' said Grace, in the irreverent way she had of speaking to both her parents. 'Don't you know that Mr. Ryland has made a bargain with me, that so long as I don't taste wine or spirits, he won't either ? And he has not touched a drop for three months now. By and by'—by which I understood her to mean when she went to Hallyards, and I seemed to shrivel up like some scorched thing under the triumphant glance she threw at me across the table—'by and by, if the craving for it returns again, I mean to put him on a course of special treatment ; and I have not

the least fear but that I'll cure him completely in time.'

The minister shook his head dubiously.

'I'm afraid,' he said, 'there's no specific discovered yet to meet so desperate a case as Ned Ryland's.'

'You're wrong there, papa,' cut in his dutiful daughter; 'there are hundreds cured every day in America with cayenne pepper, and extract of beef, and bromide of potassium.'

And as we all laughed at what seemed a very curious recipe, the girl proceeded with an earnestness that showed at least she had been devoting herself to the subject, to unfold her scheme of reformation.

'The great thing, you see,' she said, 'is to have something to allay the craving when the fits come on, as they are almost sure to do with those who have vitiated their natural tastes and weakened their powers of self-restraint; and nothing will do this more effectually than a cup of cayenne tea, well sweetened. Then I would use the extract of beef for strengthening and nourishing, as it does not try the stomach so much as solid food.'

'But all this can only apply to a man when he is sober,' I broke in. 'How would you treat him, or what could you do with him, when he has taken too much?' for I had never had anything to do with Ned myself but when he was absolutely drunk, and I wished to hear if Grace's nostrums would embrace even that desperate stage.

'I would hold my hands about him, and never

let him get too much,' she replied promptly. 'When I observed the restlessness and nervous excitement that generally precede a drinking-bout, I would administer from fifteen to twenty grains of bromide of potassium, dissolved in water: for potomania is just like any other ailment—it has its initiatory symptoms; and if they can be met at once by suitable treatment, half the battle is won.'

'Yes, if they can,' I said doubtfully.

'Oh yes, they can,' she repeated in a dictatorial tone. 'And then,' she continued, 'I would take care always to have plenty of nourishing, well-cooked food at every meal, and between whiles a supply of sweet or savoury trifles to supersede the stronger stimulant; and I would also try and keep my patient's mind amused by providing a little healthy excitement and an occasional fresh sensation, instead of leaving him to find it for himself in beer or spirits.'

'Upon my word, Grace, you have made quite a study of the subject!' said Mr. Graham, looking rather surprised and perhaps just a little frightened at his daughter's eloquence. 'Very proper and becoming, too, for a young lady in your position; we should never miss an opportunity of throwing our influence into any question involving the welfare of the community.'

Mr. Graham was no teetotaller himself, hardly even a temperate man, but his business was to preach, not to practise; and I always thought he confined himself to the limits of his duty rather too closely,

and that his preaching might have come with more power had he lived the life and led the way. When a man occupies a prominent position—set up, as it were, for a lamp to the feet and a light to the path—we feel that we are entitled to look for something more than purely negative virtues.

‘But would it not be as well, my dear,’ the minister continued, ‘that you should try your hand on some one among the labouring classes—Jamie Bell, for instance? though, to be sure, he is out of the parish now,’ he added, remembering that his territorial responsibilities in connection with Jamie were at an end. ‘People might talk, as they are apt to do when young ladies take up interesting cases, and you might find the game hardly worth the candle.’

‘Papa, I’m astonished at you! such a clever young man as Mr. Ryland, and Mr. Dale’s nephew too!’ and Grace looked virtuously indignant; while I amused myself wondering if those walks she and Mr. Dale’s nephew took together were a part of her scheme of reformation, and what her father would think of that if he came to know of it.

But Mr. Graham’s thoughts on domestic matters did not go for much in his own house; and though from the manse pew on Sundays his wife sat looking as if a second Solomon had arisen to bless us with his wisdom, in the manse on week-days, as I well knew, he was of no more account than the youngest child who was in it. So, though he continued to shake his head, Mrs. Graham took up the

running, and professed to believe in the possibility of saving Ned, and gave her daughter every encouragement to persevere in her self-imposed task.

From the way in which it was gone about, I could not mistake the fact that it was partly intended as a tacit rebuke to me for making so little of my opportunities when Ned Rylands and I were under one roof; but, as Mrs. Scott used to remark, 'It's ill cryin' f'shoo¹ tae an egg ;' and I thought they might live to discover that their crowing had been, to say the least of it, premature. At the same time, I must do them the justice to say that they seemed to appreciate my services to Alice, and tried at this juncture to make the manse a pleasant home to me.

This it might have been, and I might have blessed myself as I stood in my lot, but for the cruel wrong that underlay it all ; and the additional pain of seeing my poor young charge fading surely away, though so imperceptibly that one day she seemed no worse than the last, but every week-end found her more helpless and dependent.

My sweet Alice ! Many a pleasant talk she and I had at this time. I think I see her yet as she sat in her arm-chair propped up with pillows, her pale, spiritual face reflecting the tranquillity of the heart within. Rarely did a complaining word, or even a sign of impatience, escape her ; not even when her laboured breathing wrung the sweat from her brow, or when I held her in my arms while

¹ Cried to a bird to scare it away.

every fit of the racking cough seemed as though it would tear her chest asunder. The spasm over, her sweet, saint-like smile was her thanksgiving for merciful relief, reminding me of the words :

' In smiles she sunk her grief to lessen mine ;
She spoke me comfort and increased my pain ;

while I could only find relief in secret tears for the pain and the patience that were alike affecting to witness.

And the sight of so much suffering, so meekly borne, enabled me to make less of my own troubles, which, but for Alice Burnley's bright example, might have assumed a morbid phase. Ay me ! when hope was but deferred, I struggled to resign myself and salt my sacrifice ; but when it came to being ' salted with fire ' myself, then I saw that self was only half put down within me, and the companionship of a saint on earth like Alice was to me like that of him who was sent to ' Brother Saul ' stricken and blind, that he ' might receive his sight.'





CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FUTURE MRS. DALE AND HER HOPEFUL NEPHEW.

IOR some weeks there had not been the most distant allusion to the marriage—not a word that I could twist into the slightest reference to it; and I was trying to keep the ache out of my heart by thinking that perhaps, after all, the much-dreaded affair might blow past. Neither Hallyards nor its master had been so much as mentioned in my hearing, and I knew absolutely nothing of how matters were progressing at my old home. My life and my surroundings, so far as the outer world was concerned, had become a kind of 'sleepy hollow'; but I knew that calms are deceitful at the best of times, and too often precede the storm that is to engulf all in wreck and ruin.

I might have walked over to Mrs. Scott's any time during these weeks, when taking the daily constitutional on which Alice insisted; but my

pride forbade me turning my steps in the direction of Hallyards, though I am free to confess that never a road would have come so kindly to my eager feet. Even a sight of Ned Ryland would have been welcomed, both for his own sake and that of others ; for indeed I always liked him, in spite of all the trouble he had been the perhaps innocent means of causing me ; and somehow I had a feeling that if he could have helped me he would have been generous enough to do his best for me. I did not imagine that he was doing it even then, in his own erratic fashion following out his own devices to the top of his bent, all the better pleased that he knew he was running counter to his mother's wishes.

Just as the unexpected always happens, the lurking desire that I felt to see Ned was most unexpectedly gratified ; for when I had abandoned all immediate hope of seeing him or any of my old friends again, Grace called me out of Alice's room one day, and told me that Mr. Ryland wanted to see me.

Grace always spoke of our young reprobate as Mr. Ryland. I suppose it was part of her scheme of reform to try and bolster him up in his own eyes, and in the face of the social circle before whom he had sunk so low.

'He insists on seeing you !' she said excitedly, though I could see no reason why he should require to urge so natural a wish.

I went down alone to the dining-room, and found Ned standing, hat in hand, looking so hand-

some and bright that I almost ceased to wonder at the interest Miss Graham was taking in him, though it did look rather like playing with edge-tools devoting herself to so attractive a young man, just about her own age—aunt of his though she was to be.

‘Well, Annie, how are you?’ he exclaimed as I entered, in his easy, *nonchalant* way, though certain passages in our two lives might have furnished a reason for some consciousness.

I told him how I felt, and gravely inquired after his own welfare.

‘Me!’ with a laugh; ‘oh, I’m all square and above-board, don’t you see? Grace is keeping her weather-eye on me now. When the bo’sun pipes, what can a fellow do but dance?’

I fancied Ned looked rather uneasy and nervous as he thus explained his position; so I remarked, as steadily as I could, ‘She’s going to be your aunt, is she not?’

‘My aunt!’ he laughed. ‘Well, yes, I believe she’s going to come something of the kind over me; but it’s not publicly announced yet, so you see I can’t rightly be discussing so private an affair out of the family.’

I took the hint and dropped the subject.

‘Grace wants me to learn farming—sheep farming,’ he remarked next; ‘and I am seriously thinking of trying it; so I called to say good-bye—just to show there’s no bad feeling, you know.’

I did not understand him in the least, but it did

not signify. 'Bad feeling!' I repeated; 'no, of course not. But are you really going so far away?'

'Well, Grace thinks I'll do better where I'm not known,' he replied candidly; 'less temptation, and that sort of thing.'

'And where will that be?' I asked.

'Oh, some wilderness in the Highlands or—somewhere,' he replied vaguely. 'The sailing orders are sealed yet, and are not to be opened till we're well out to sea.'

'But you don't sail to the Highlands.'

'Oh yes, you do! Up the Crinan Canal and round the Kyles of Bute; though I believe I have put the cart before the horse, as a land-lubber would say. You've never had a trip in the *Iona*, Miss Forbes?' questioningly; and as I shook my head, 'Well, you had better keep that for your marriage-jaunt, and then, if your bridegroom is dull and stupid as I've a notion he'll be,—you are just the sort of woman to marry some old cove for his money,' rattled on my reckless visitor,—'you'll be sure to be entertained on board.'

I shivered visibly. He who was to have been my bridegroom looked dull and stupid enough, certainly, the last glance I got of him. But of course this foolish young fellow was only talking at random.

'You'll go up-stairs and see Miss Burnley and say good-bye to her as well?' I then said.

'Oh, Ann, don't speak of it!' he cried, looking

grave all in a minute. 'I may be a graceless dog, but I could not face Alice, not if you would make me a port-admiral. Grace would not like it, either.'

'Always Grace!' I remarked. 'She's going to have a dutiful nephew, it seems.'

'Nothing less would suit Miss Graham,' he replied, screwing up his mouth into a ludicrous imitation of Grace, in her didactic moods.

I did not see any use in prolonging the interview; nothing definite ever came of talking to Ned. He could keep the ball rolling longer than most people; but when it came to making the play, he would veer round and set off on a new tack, without either rhyme or reason; and for my own part, I never could quite make up my mind whether he was most knave or more fool.

'Then shall we say good-bye? I must get back to Alice,' I said.

'Oh yes! but you'll give a fellow a smack and a shake, and say God bless you, before we part?'

'My smacking days are done with, Ned,' I replied; 'but there's my hand, and God bless you, and confirm you in good, and prosper you wherever you go.'

He seemed impressed, and made no more to do, but quietly took the hand I offered him, and politely held the door for me while I passed from the room.

There was no one with Alice when I went back to her, but she looked wistfully in my face, as if

she knew something of my errand, and would fain have known more; but if the old sore was inclined to open sometimes,—for the best of us are but of the earth, earthy,—she never knowingly laid bare the wound by either question or remark.

That evening, while we were at tea, Miss Graham rather startled us out of our usual humdrum composure by announcing that Mr. Ryland was going off next day to look after a place where he could learn farming.

Of course I knew something of it, but the old folks were evidently hearing of it for the first time, and seemed much surprised.

‘Learn farming!’ repeated her father. ‘Why, what more farming does he want than what he could learn from his uncle?’

Then Mrs. Graham asked if his mother liked the plan, and when it had been arranged.

I did not think anything of it at the time, but I remembered afterwards that neither of them got any direct reply from their daughter.

Presently Mr. Graham began to wonder to what part of the world Ned would bend his steps.

‘Beyond Glasgow, I believe,’ Grace said.

‘It’s a pity but he had waited till next week, and taken care of you on your journey,’ remarked her mother.

It had been understood in the family for some time that Miss Graham was shortly going to Glasgow, I supposed to purchase her *trousseau*.

She was to pay a visit to a married cousin in the

first place, and then her mother was to join her, and the shopping was to begin. At least this was what I gathered from the fragments of disjointed talk that reached me, though, oddly enough, I cannot now recall a word or syllable they ever uttered to that effect. But, at all events, it was an established fact that Grace was going to Glasgow; and this was what her mother meant when she spoke of Ned Ryland waiting to escort her.

‘I need no escort, mamma. It’s only fifty miles; and, besides, it’s not so long since you all thought that Mr. Ryland had more need of some one to take care of him than I had.’

‘That’s true enough,’ said the minister, ‘and I think so still. Grace will do quite as well by herself.’

On the third morning after Grace left us, just as I was giving our invalid her breakfast, I became aware of some unusual commotion down-stairs.

The manse was ordinarily very quiet. The minister was a great student, though so little came of it; and probably the attenuated grasp he got of his subjects was easily ruptured, and necessitated circumspection; so his wife kept the maids well up to their duty in respect of noise, and when any loud sounds reached us in Alice’s room, we knew something had occurred to demoralize the household.

On this particular morning a rushing to and fro, intermingled with mysterious interjections

and exclamations, culminated in the housemaid abruptly bursting into our room without the accustomed preliminary tap. 'Oh, please, would you just come down for a minute, Miss Forbes?' she said. 'The mistress is in a fit, and Betsy can't tell what to do about sending in the breakfast.'

Confused between the necessity of keeping my patient calm, the startling accounts of Mrs. Graham, and the ludicrous difficulty in which it had landed the maids, I hardly knew at first what way to turn; but, laying poor Alice gently back, and persuading her that it would most likely turn out to be some trivial affair, I descended to the dining-room, to find Mr. Graham standing helplessly beside his wife, trying to soothe her; while she, refusing to be comforted, was wringing her hands and crying incoherently for Grace.

'My innocent lamb! my bonnie bairn!' she was exclaiming excitedly—evidently going a long way back to hit upon what had probably been the most interesting time of her daughter's life, her childhood; for it seemed to me that it would require even more than a mother's partiality to discover much innocence in Grace Graham now.

'What is it, Mrs. Graham?' I said, going up to her and seizing her firmly by the wrists,—which I had heard was an approved method of dealing with hysterical parties,—at the same time speaking in a firm tone of voice.

'It's my Gracie—my darling! lying dead, and ill, and her mother not near her.'

'Oh, Margaret, Margaret! do be quiet and listen to reason,' pleaded Mr. Graham. 'If there had been an accident, we would certainly have heard of it before this. The fact is, Miss Forbes,' turning to me, 'we have had a letter from my niece, Mrs. Bennet, this morning, asking what has become of her cousin, as she had not put in an appearance even last night, and they have been waiting for her at every train.'

'Oh yes, she's killed, or she would have written! and she'll be wanting her mother by this time, and how am I to find her?' sobbed Mrs. Graham, rather more quietly, but very illogically.

It certainly looked alarming. No wonder the poor mother was conjuring up frightful and impossible visions, the absurdity of which I in vain attempted to make her recognise. Then, remembering my charge in her lonely sick-room, the waiting breakfast, and the perplexed and expectant maids, I suggested that the meal should be served in the meantime, and after that Mr. Graham might be able to arrange what best to do. Poor man! he caught eagerly at my proposal; he would lose much before he lost his appetite.

'A very sensible move, my dear,' he said, betrayed into this affectionate tone by the prospect of an interlude in the shape of breakfast; 'very proper that the meal should be no longer delayed. You will find yourself much refreshed and strengthened by a cup of tea,' he continued, turning to his wife; 'but I think, Margaret, we

will dispense with the exercises this morning, for I hardly feel in a fit state to conduct them.'

Accordingly, the breakfast made its appearance, and the minister did full justice to it; but we had some difficulty in persuading his wife to swallow anything, till at last she gave in, on my representing to her the propriety of keeping up her strength for possible requirements.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

PASSING AWAY.

IHE important ceremonial of breakfast past, and the—as I would have thought—still more paramount one of family worship put aside, Mr. Graham went into Dunsford, and telegraphed to Glasgow for latest particulars.

‘Nothing further known,’ was wired back to him; and on his returning to the manse with the unsatisfactory intelligence, the poor distressed parents decided to go themselves and institute a search for the missing one.

As I saw that inaction was painful, if not altogether impossible to them, I threw the weight of my concurrence into the scale; and then it became necessary that Alice should be told of what was passing. So far I had put her off, and managed to keep her mind busy with other things; and not till the Glasgow journey of her aunt and uncle was finally arranged for was

she told of the trouble that was hanging over the household.

She looked eagerly in my face, while, for her sake, I tried to make light of the affair,—the blue eyes dilated, and a faint flush overspread her cheek.

‘Annie,’ she said, ‘it’s all plain to me, but don’t say anything to aunt and uncle.’

‘What is plain, Alice dear?’ I asked in surprise, for I thought she, of all the house, knew least of what had been going on.

‘Cannot you guess, Annie?’ she said, almost impatiently for her; then she added more slowly, ‘They might have waited a little longer;’ and she hid her face in the pillows.

‘Is it anything about Mr. Dale, Alice?’ my heart standing still at the bare possibility of his being mixed up with the affair.

‘Mr. Dale! No. Oh, Annie! it’s Ned, I think; I have suspected it for a long time.’

‘Clever Alice!’ I cried aloud; ‘I believe you have hit the truth. Oh, how stupid and blind you must think us all, never to see what was going on! Spare me for a minute;’ and I ran down-stairs.

I found Mr. Graham in his study, arranging and putting away his papers before starting.

‘I will go over to Hallyards, if you would like it, sir,’ I said, not knowing how better to broach my subject, ‘and ask to see Mrs. Ryland, and find out if she has heard from her son, and where he may be by this time.’

Mr. Graham, as might have been expected, did not take me in the least. 'Will you mention this —this sad business?' he asked helplessly.

'Just as you please; of course you know best. But will it not be disparaging to Miss Graham to make a secret of it?'

'Perhaps,' he said dubiously; and just then Mrs. Graham joined us. She was full of the packing by this time, and leaving the house and the servants, and immediately began to give me instructions about eggs, and beef, and butter, and cream,—actually losing sight of her trouble so far as to ask my advice about taking her best black silk and her dress cap.

'Would it be of any use,' I said, when these matters of fact had all been discussed and settled, 'for me to go down to Hallyards and ask Mrs. Ryland if she has heard from her son since he left?'

Mrs. Graham honoured me with a scornful stare. 'I have too much trouble of my own to be thinking of other people just now,' she said reproachfully. 'What is Mrs. Ryland's son to me in comparison with my poor lost girl?' and she forthwith began to weep and wring her hands anew.

'What if they be together?' was on my lips to rejoin; but, standing there face to face with the parents, whose confidence in their daughter was as yet unshaken, it seemed altogether too unwarrantable a conjecture for me to throw out.

Suddenly the minister seemed to get a glimmer-

ing of light—how little or how much I could only guess. ‘Let Miss Forbes go, my dear,’ he said; ‘it’s a kind offer, and can do no harm.’

It was a more self-denying offer than either of them suspected; but I felt that at this crisis I had no business to be consulting my own inclinations, and that if I could help to throw any light on the mystery by following up Alice’s cue, it behoved me to do so.

Having provided as far as I could for her comfort, and left her aunt sitting weeping beside her, which I hoped would keep them both from wearying, I set out on my walk. It was only a couple of miles; and as the minister’s horse—a slow, steady brute—had already been into Dunsford, and would be required in the afternoon to go back to the station, I volunteered to walk, and no one objected.

I had not been along the road between the manse and Hallyards since that terrible night when, with winged feet, I ran for my life, for the sake of the life that they told me was ebbing so fast. It was therefore no small trial to follow its windings again, and pass the spot where he fell, and throw a hasty glance at Black Prince’s grave, which was barely green yet—not to speak of the scanty welcome I was likely to meet with from Mrs. Ryland, and the difficulty I would have with her in performing my errand. What if I met my master?—for I still clung in fancy to the old name, —and what kind of meeting would it be? I could

not for the world have told that day whether the meeting or the missing would have been the worst to bear; but I was spared the pain of either, for, on reaching Hallyards, the first news I heard was, that something had gone wrong with Mr. Ryland again,—the servants could not say what,—and that his mother and uncle had left home that morning by the first train to look after him.

Then it was more than probable that Alice Burnley's surmise was true. What grief and pain and trouble these two were giving their friends! More than they were worth, I thought; but the yearning of parents after the flesh is only second to that of the great Father of love and mercy, and, like the Good Shepherd, they are ever ready to leave the ninety-nine and go into the mountains seeking that which is gone astray.

Explaining to Jane, poor thing (her wooden-headedness stood me in good stead that day, and prevented her taking an inconvenient interest in the matter), that I had no time for delay, and also leaving a friendly message for Mrs. Scott and my other old neighbours, I hurried back to the manse, with my errand apparently fruitless, but at the same time fraught with much significance. I wondered if Mrs. Graham would see it yet.

Not a bit of it! I found her still clinging to the idea—foolish though it was in these days, when news are flashed through the length and breadth of the land with lightning speed—that Grace was killed, or at least had met with some dreadful accident.

I could hardly let myself think that she really believed it ; but I saw that her sorrow, at least, was real, and I mingled my tears with hers when I found the bereaved pair sitting hand in hand in the study, every voiceless hour adding to their uncertainty and their pain, waiting for the time of starting. Poor unhappy mother ! she put her other hand into mine as I told my—to her—pointless story ; for sorrow seeks to lay its head on bosoms that joy would never think of leaning on, and it comes easier to many of us to weep with the mourner than to rejoice with those on whom the world is smiling.

They got off at last, and then I had time to turn again to the sick-room and my special charge. It was at Alice's own request that I had rather devoted myself to her aunt, and I had sore misgivings all the time that I was not where I ought to have been, and that the housemaid, who was sent to sit with Miss Burnley, would but ill understand her wishes. It had been a trying day for us all ; but to her, in her weak state, it was little less than the loss of what vitality remained. Outwardly she was calm enough, but as the evening closed in she began to doze and wander in her talk, and then I saw plainly that the excitement and the strain had been too much for her. For it was all of Ned she thought or spoke,—the bright sunny boy who had won her girlish love,—not the thoughtless, self-indulgent fellow who had wrecked the peace of her later years, and whose name had never crossed

her lips from the time I came to the manse to nurse her till that day.

In the intervals of sleep she would wake up partially, and babble of her love. Sometimes I could make out her meaning, and sometimes not ; but I think, in her exceeding weakness, she got confused in her bearings, and mixed up the things of time and sense with the untried realities of the better land, whose eternal mysteries were so soon to be revealed to her.

About midnight she woke fully up quite suddenly, and exclaimed, 'Annie, I would like to work him something that he could wear on the voyage.' She spoke more firmly than she had done during the evening, and her face, which had looked drawn and pinched throughout the day, had now become wonderfully like what she was before her illness.

'Yes, darling,' I replied, choking back my tears ; and, apparently quite satisfied, she closed her eyes and dozed off again.

I had been sleeping in her room all along, and, though it was far past my usual time for retiring, I felt no inclination for rest, but sat and watched my much-loved charge, as her bosom rose and fell more regularly and calmly than it had done for some time.

Presently she woke up again. 'Have you any soup at the fire to-night, Annie?' she said. 'I might want some shortly.'

I had not brought up the usual supply, for, alas ! I did not think it would be required ; but I rose

hastily, and, telling her there was plenty in the house, I was just crossing the floor to go in search of it, when an indescribable something in her appearance arrested my steps and chained me to the spot.

Never do I expect to witness the like again; not twice in a lifetime will it be given to a bondager of death to see the grim king come to adorn the casket while he rifles the gem,—to behold the clay, already cold at the extremities, transformed by more than earthly beauty,—the cheek painted by an invisible hand, the eye lit up by a radiance not of this world, and the waxen brow—

‘But oh, the brow’s pure whiteness who shall utter?—
Like a shell-snowy strand,
Or when a sunbeam falleth through the shutter
On a dead baby’s hand.’

Not for some moments after the last faint breath had been gently sighed forth did the ghastly lineaments of death overspread the angelic countenance, to stamp as their own the mortal frame from which the disembodied spirit had for ever passed.

It came upon me so suddenly, that, awe-stricken and dumb before the fell power against which there is no contending, I did not at first realize its terribleness. It never occurred to me to reflect that they who should have surrounded the dying bed were all far away—that even of our small household, all save myself were probably wrapped

in unconscious slumber ; and even when I came to think of it, and went and roused the frightened maids, and they and I watered the couch with tears, it did not come home to me then, as it did afterwards, that sweet Alice Burnley had none to weep beside her bier but the alien and the hireling.

Her parents were long since dead—dead before she knew their worth or could mourn their loss ; but where were those who represented to her all of parent love she had ever known ? where the sister-cousin who had shared in all her pleasures, and some of her pains ? Even a visit from home, in Alice's critical state, was thoughtless enough ; but if, as there was too much ground for supposing, Grace Graham had chosen such a time for an action that could only be called foolish and wicked at any time, then how selfish and criminal her conduct ! Viewed beside the saintly form that would never again be cast down by sorrow or elated with joy, how paltry and pitiable such a proceeding looked ! But even as paltry and unprofitable were my vague suspicions, and I put them from me as unworthy the sad and solemn occasion, and addressed myself to necessary details.

What little we could do, without the heads of the household to direct us, we did. Ah ! what a bitter trial to move those fair limbs, in which for the first time there was no responsive movement ; to lift the helpless hands that used to clasp over mine so fondly ; to comb out the long fair hair, while the poor pale face lay meekly unconscious of

all that was being done ; to sever a silken tress, still careful of disfigurement, while ever uppermost came the mocking thought, what did it matter now ?

This painful service over, I anxiously awaited the morning light, with its daily recurring post, to learn to what address I could send a telegram. But, as if to put the finishing stroke to my perplexities, no letter came. Thus put to it, I bethought myself to telegraph to the Glasgow cousin, which I should have done at first, but which, fortunately, was not yet too late.





CHAPTER XXIX.

A DREAM AND A LEGACY.

WITH no more pressing duty than simply to wait for a reply to my telegram, I went and seated myself in Alice's room, beside the white-draped bed and the long narrow form outlined on the snowy coverlet, to indulge for a little in the luxury of grief. My eyes were hot and heavy, no less with the tears I had shed than with those I had restrained that I might not be unfitted for necessary duties. So, sitting on the arm-chair, now tenantless, with my head resting where Alice Burnley's had so lately leant, I permitted the wave of natural sorrow to sweep over me like an ice-bound flood set free by summer heat. But tears, like torrents, dry up all the sooner for their mighty rushing, and what we vainly think a spring soon becomes but an emptied channel.

Consoling memories ere long claim their part, and, first in whispering, halting accents, and then

in louder strains, tell us that our irreparable loss is to those we mourn unspeakable gain.

'But why more woe? more comfort let it be;
Nothing is dead but that which wished to die;
Nothing is dead but what, encumbered, galled,
Blocked up the pass, and barred from real life.'

So sang the poet, bereft, as I was, of the companionship of a saint on earth; and could I selfishly sorrow as they who have no hope, when I doubted not that she I mourned had entered into her rest?

As for my own natural rest, I had of late lost many hours of it, and the whole of the preceding night had of course been spent in entire indifference to the wants of the body. But now they were becoming clamant, as they always must do in the end, and drowsiness especially will surprise and take captive the weary frame when exhausted nature can no longer struggle with its infirmities.

Besides which, I fell into a train of thought; and deep thinking, or rather, continuous concentration of thought on one subject, will generally of itself induce sleep. For I had begun to ponder how it comes that our actual experiences of death-bed scenes differ so greatly from what we read or hear of them; and how, when by much precedent of dying saints, my saintly Alice's last words should have been of the heavenly land to which she was hastening, they were all of the earthly love she was leaving for ever. But, with my difficulty still unsolved, I sank into a slumber as

unconscious as hers who calmly lay at rest so near me, in the deep sleep from which there is no earthly awaking.

But my slumbers must have lightened as the day wore on, for the psychologists tell us that deep sleep and dreaming are two incompatible conditions of our mental atmosphere ; and, sitting sleeping there in Alice's death-chamber, I had a weird, strange dream, which, though I do not believe in such visions, will never be effaced from my memory, or its influence entirely wear off, so long as earthly emotions have power to move me.

My dream was not unlike his who, with the stones of that place for his pillow, lay down to sleep between Beersheba and Padan-aram. The veiled land, at least what appeared to me as such, was opened to my sight ; but instead of the ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels ascending and descending on it, I saw only the 'glad ghost' with whom I had so lately parted, standing on the edge of a great white cloud, scanning with eager gaze the blue empyrean. Not as the feeble tenant of an earthly tabernacle did I now see her, but in the beautiful words of Longfellow—

'As a fair maiden in her father's mansion,
Clothed with celestial grace ;
And beautiful, with all the soul's expansion,
Did I behold her face,'

as she stood with outstretched arms to welcome one

whom she had not lost, but only preceded to the 'shining land.'

I did not need to be told for whose home-coming she watched. In dreamland the imagination never plays us so scurvy a trick as to carry us up to a blind fence or to the brink of a precipice, only to find ourselves blocked and barred, as in our waking hours. In that wonderland, difficulties are either a part of the plot, and as such do not impede our progress, or we clear the obstruction and bridge the chasm without reference to any known laws, and without a feeling of surprise at our extraordinary and unwonted achievements.

So now I knew intuitively that Alice was watching for him whose earthly rehabilitation she had watched for in vain, but who was now about to be restored to her on the heavenly shore, 'clothed and in his right mind,' as, even in my dream I remembered, she had once said to me, as she hung on my neck in the old parlour at Hallyards, and confided to me her secret hope that Ned Ryland would turn from his evil ways, and that the faith and patience of the human love she bore him might be the means of leading him to the higher life divine.

What more of my dream—if more there were—was lost in the surprise of my awaking; for suddenly the door opened, and in walked Mr. and Mrs. Graham.

They spoke no word to me then, but kindly pressed my hand as I rose and turned down the

sheet, that they might look on the face of their dead, whom living they would look upon no more.

Mrs. Graham was visibly affected, but on the whole took Alice's death more quietly than she had taken Grace's loss. Perhaps she, too, found that grief is no perpetual fount, and that its streams were already exhausted—certainly both she and the minister might have had ten years added to their lives since yesterday, so aged and broken did they look. I wondered, could Grace have seen them as they stood by Alice's bier, mourning no less for the living than the dead, how she could have borne the self-accusing sight, or what she would have thought of her conduct in the light of their grief.

But indeed, do these erring ones ever think, in the midst of their guilty pleasures, of the dear ones whose hearts they break; of the days and hours of shame and agony endured on their account; of the swollen eyes—the sleepless nights—the untasted meals—the shrinking from the world's hard gaze—the mother's bowed head—the father's palsied hand? Nay! surely they cannot think, or the intolerable burden would weigh them to the dust.

After a few minutes given to silent contemplation, for we found it impossible to ask or answer questions in that mute presence, I gently replaced the covering, and followed Mr. and Mrs. Graham from the room.

The minister beckoned me to the study.

'We were at Mrs. Bennet's,' he said, 'when your telegram arrived, and would most probably have

been home this afternoon at any rate ;' and then he paused. Presently taking a letter from his pocket-book, ' You may read that,' he said huskily, ' for I feel strangely unmanned.'

I took the letter from his hand and read it, and did not wonder that, as a parent, he should feel it deeply. It was of course from Grace, and had come that same morning addressed to Mrs. Bennet's care. By the time it reached her parents' hands, the writer calculated that she and Mr. Ryland—to whom she was united in body as well as in spirit (Grace had always been prone to indulge in sentiment on occasions)—would be well out to sea on their voyage to New Zealand, where they intended, in the first place, to visit her uncles. Mrs. Graham had two bachelor brothers, wealthy squatters in that flourishing colony ; and the whole plan was excellent in conception, had it been sensibly and respectably carried out.

For there was little or no necessity for the step she had taken. By patience and some generalship (and Miss Graham was no mean tactician, though I had seen one of her schemes fall through), she could easily have won her parents to give their consent to her marriage with Mr. Ryland—ne'er-do-well though all allowed him to be. As for the other side of the house, she was an acknowledged favourite with the mother ; and if, as I was always fearing, she was considered worthy of the uncle, she would indisputably be thrown away on the nephew.

But instead of chancing the paternal blessing, she

had elected to elope in the most erratic fashion, and the sting of it to the old people was, that a daughter of the manse, who had been held up rather too ostentatiously as an example to the parish, should have turned out the worst regulated and most ill-disciplined among them !

For we did not even know by what name to call her. Her mother indeed, with suspicious persistency, was always careful to speak of her as Mrs. Edward Ryland ; but for this title, which indeed seemed rather too fine for Ned's wife, even supposing he had one, we had no surer basis than the 'union' Grace had spoken of, and which might be either sentimental or real. That we knew it was all right by and by was one comfort, but by that time it was mixed up with very sad news, in the distraction of which we almost lost sight of our first fears.

In the midst of these, I remember of thinking it a great aggravation of trouble that Alice's death and Grace's escapade should have befallen us almost simultaneously ; but as the days wore on, I saw that arrangements made necessary by the one diverted attention from the other ; and Maggie, the second daughter,—a sweet, artless lassie,—being sent for from her school, made a break to us, and helped to fill the blank in a house so suddenly left childless.

But another surprise for me was yet to come, and for more than me, though it was accompanied in the latter case with some less pleasing sensations.

I think the minister was cognisant of what was about to be made public, but I suspect he had not had the moral courage to communicate so distasteful a piece of information to his wife. I refer to Alice Burnley's will, which I was called into the study to hear read, immediately after the funeral, and fancied my ears were deceiving me when I heard that Alice had bequeathed to 'Ann Forbes, my dear friend, the sum of one thousand pounds, as a mark of esteem and regard, and an acknowledgment of the care and love I know she will bestow on me to the end.'

It was a high testimonial, and an affecting evidence of the love and trust my lost charge had reposed in me; and so much was I overcome, that I was fain to lay my head on the sofa-arm where I stood, and sob out my fervent, grateful thanks. Mr. Graham kindly tried to comfort me, and expressed his entire satisfaction that my services to his dear departed niece 'had been so amply compensated.'

It was not very gracefully put, but I gave him credit for meaning better than he could express; and I was much relieved to perceive that he did not grudge the money to me, more particularly as he was the only one who was entitled to a voice in the matter, Miss Burnley being his own niece; whereas his wife, who could not conceal her displeasure that so large a sum had gone past her family, was only an aunt by marriage, and had never put the orphan on an equal footing with them, either in her home or in her heart.

At this time I had no opportunity of learning how Mrs. Ryland and her brother were bearing their end of the tree—for that they had a deep interest in the matter no reasonable mortal could doubt ; and as unreasonable would it have been to suppose that they were not feeling rather relieved than otherwise that Ned was in some measure off their hands and in fairly good keeping.

So far as human eye could see, it was in truth a splendid chance for him—getting away from temptation, from evil influences, from the power of habit, and having all the conditions of his life so entirely changed. It would indeed be strange if his mother and uncle did not see in the movement a hopeful prospect for his future, and hail the departure of the young couple for foreign shores as a possible new departure on the way to prosperity and happiness.

Alas ! how often do we fancy we have found a way out of our perplexities, when in very deed we are only about to find that God's ways are not as our ways, nor His thoughts as our thoughts!

At the first, when our suspicions about Grace and Ned were fully confirmed, I understood from Maggie Graham that Mrs. Ryland was keeping rather aloof, and seemingly wishing to carry herself in a high-handed way. But she came down to the funeral nevertheless ; and, being now so closely connected with the family, and a keen hand at money matters always, she remained to hear the will read, and watch over the interests of her son and her new daughter.

I thought her much fallen off ; but I did not think of attributing her wan looks to grief, for she appeared to be in her usual spirits, and made no pretence of sympathizing with the Grahams in either their dead sorrow or their living one. I heard her give something as like a snort as a human nostril could be expected to emit when the codicil with my legacy was read ; and that was all the notice she vouchsafed, either to it or to me.

She did not remain to dinner, and I saw no more of her at that time ; indeed it appeared highly improbable then that we would ever meet again. As for speaking, there had been little enough of that between us for some time. But we are short-sighted creatures, and our attempts to read the future only serve to show us how often it disappoints our fears and exceeds our hopes, and how much better it would be for us to go on in quietness and confidence, trusting that all things are working together for our ultimate good.

As to Matthew Dale, I managed to catch a brief glimpse of him as the funeral *cortège* moved away ; and truly I was 'baith fain and wae,'¹ as good Mrs. Scott used to say, to see him looking so strong, and yet, as I thought, submitting so weakly to his sister's interference. And then I felt disgusted with myself, just to think that every motion of my mind and every feeling of my heart should still centre in him, while he went his own way in the world, and our lines to all appearance lay so far apart.

¹ Both pleased and sorrowful.



CHAPTER XXX.

AN UNEXPECTED SUMMONS.

MY occupation, like Othello's, being gone, there remained nothing for me but to pack up my carriages and betake myself once more to my old haven of refuge, Nurse's parlour at Blackadder. Mrs. Graham threw no obstacles, either sentimental or material, in my way, but, on the contrary, rather sped my parting; and I was soon installed in my old quarters, feeling much as formerly, excepting for the difference—thanks to Alice Burnley—that I was no longer dependent on my ability to work and my chance of finding a sphere of labour.

What this difference was to me can only be fully understood by those who, from depending on a possible income from the fruits of honest industry, are suddenly raised to the dignity of capitalists,—lifted, as it were, above the caprices of fortune, and screened from the more tangible capriciousness of the labour-market, which, somewhat unaccountably,

never seems to adapt itself to the wants either of the place-seekers or the place-givers—the one always finding themselves unduly overweighted by competitors, and the other by the deficiency of skilled workers.

Now in the contemplation of my independence, as I drew in the easiest of Janet's hardwood chairs to the good old body's parlour fire, there passed over me such a wave of comfort as occasionally washes up to the lee-shore of our lives, sending a thrill of sensuous if transitory happiness over and beyond the water-mark of our sorrows, and scattering the slimy foam left by the latest heaving of the troubled breast.

Not that I intended sitting long there with my feet on the fender and my hands lying idly in my lap. No; I felt then, as I have always felt, that the heart aches less when the hands are full, and that there is no better magnifying-glass for grief than sitting down to gaze at it through the vacuum of a purposeless existence.

So, after a brief holiday, which I thought it only right to allow myself, and because I knew old Nurse would insist on it, I would seek for such employment as that in which I had already been engaged.

In the meantime, I would have my brother Jamie down to Blackadder, where he and I (oh, the mighty power of gold!) would for a time throw dull care to any element that promised the readiest absorption, and give ourselves up to such a season of delicious idleness as neither of us had known since the light-

hearted days in which we thought the conning of our daily tasks a device of the Enemy—who, old Janet had duly taught us, went about like a roaring lion seeking whom he might devour.

Then I wrote to James, who was engaged in teaching during the summer recess, bidding him arrange his holiday at once, irrespective of pre-engagements and regardless of expense—for there is no prodigal like the man, or even the woman, who has been suddenly lifted from the deep mire of poverty ; but before his reply reached me, fate interposed to mar my plans, and while I mentally rebelled at the interference, my destiny was being wrought out in a way I could never even have projected.

For what else could it mean, that I should be summoned to my old home at Hallyards, but just that the desire of my heart was at last to be given me—and that, too, through her who had so long stood between me and it ?

Though it appeared so incomprehensible at the time, what more natural and of everyday occurrence than that the haughty spirit should be bowed and broken on a sick-bed, and that though the darkness of an unawakened conscience should have obscured the meridian, yet in the evening-time it should be light ?

For it was Mrs. Ryland who called me to what, even then, looked like proving her dying bed,—called me, not as a visitor, but sending Ann Scott to entreat me to come to her, and stay beside her

and nurse her. At least such was the impression the foreman's wife conveyed to me ; and I always suspected that it was through no fault of hers that it turned out to be an erroneous one, but rather a willing deception on the part of one who had good reasons for wishing to keep her motive secret.

Unwilling as I was to enter on such work,—for nursing the sick should be a labour of love as well as of skill,—the eloquence of the messenger, and my own weak hankering after everything connected with the name of Matthew Dale, prevailed with me to lay all my scruples aside and obey the summons.

No respite can they know for whom the fiat has gone forth, and neither can they delay who must walk with them down to the brink of the dark and silent river ; and though I pled hard with Mrs. Scott for a week of breathing-time, I knew I was uttering the sheerest folly ; and if I had not already been aware of it, her inexorable sense of duty soon put all my arguments to shame.

‘Crater ! bairn !’ she said,—for she always seemed to look upon me as some young thing to be petted and admonished,—‘think ye the auld mistress can pit aff her trouble till yer ploy be past ? Na, na ; she’s maybe been nae grit frien’ o’ yours, an’ we can but roose¹ the foord as we find it, but she’s in the straits o’ sair distress the noo, an’ ye maun haste ye tae help her.’

‘But a week only, Mrs. Scott,’ I pleaded ; ‘she might not be much worse in that time, and Jane

¹ Extol.

has plenty of time to wait upon her ; and my brother is coming, I expect, and I would like to be here, at least, to receive him.'

'Let him come,' she rejoined ; 'he's young and waal ;¹ an' what for wad ye haud your han's roun' him, wi' health an' strength tae bless him, an' sorra a care tae ding² him ? But it's an awsome differ wi' the sick woman ; an' gin we choise tae ware³ oorsels whaur we're no needit, an' turn oor backs on the dowie⁴ an' feckless,⁵ we're workin' tae pleesur oorsels, an' no' for the luv o' man nor the fear o' Him that made him. Mair nor that, the young callant can come tae the Ha' ; an' the caller air an' a bowl o' loany⁶ at milking-time wull aiblins bring the colour tae his haffets⁷ quicker than oucht ye hae hereawa.'

'Well,' I said, with a sigh, half of contented acquiescence and half for the disillusioned holiday, —'well, I'll merely wait to-morrow's post, and come by the afternoon train if I can.'

'Gude trulins,⁸ na ! that winna dae : ye maun come richt awa' wi' me this verra day, for I as gude as said I wad seek ye wi' me ; an' the bairnses' faither is to meet us at Dinsfoord, sae ye can bring yer kist alang wi' ye.'

I knew that when Mrs. Scott relapsed into the old mode of indicating her better half she was

¹ Active, strong.

² To worst, to overcome.

³ Spend.

⁴ Worn out.

⁵ Feeble.

⁶ New milk—probably from *loaning*, the greensward where the cows are milked.

⁷ The temples.

⁸ Truly.

greatly moved, for I had well-nigh laughed her out of it when at Hallyards ; and only on exciting occasions did it slip out unawares.

‘Well, then, so let it be,’ I said ; and forthwith she and I proceeded to stuff some necessary apparel into my travelling-bag — a ‘kist,’ as betokening lengthened stay, I firmly resisted ; and, taking leave of Janet, who had hardly time either to dissent or protest, we started by the afternoon train for Dunsford.

On the way, Mrs. Scott informed me that the dog-cart horse was ill,—that indeed they had never been out of trouble in the stable since the master’s mishap, — and that was how her husband had brought her to Dunsford in a farm-cart, and was waiting there to transact some business and take us back with him.

‘I houp he may hae a’thing ready whan we win there ; men-folks are aye sae taiglesome¹ whan there’s onything by ordinar,’ she concluded.

But Scott, honest man, was by no means ready. He was waiting on, he told us, for some ‘physic for the mere—an’ the tither yaud wanted shoein’—an’ the graith,’ it appeared, wanted ‘shewin’’² too ; so between what was to be shod, and what was to be sewed (though Scott of course pronounced them very much alike), he was very little further forward than when his wife left him. So, telling him to follow us as quickly as possible, we set out walking slowly towards Hallyards.

¹ Off-putting, dilatory.

² Vernacular for sewing.

With much loitering and lingering, and many a look back, we had nearly got half-way home when the ring of wheels and hoofs raised our hopes that the tardy driver was at length making up on us.

'We sud ne'er hae left him,' exclaimed his wife, looking over her shoulder for the hundredth time; 'he gangs clean stupid whane'er he wins ower the march. That's nane o' oor horse yet,' she added, with a sigh, and on we plodded along the miry road again.

But the cart, or rather the driver, drew up on reaching us.

'Lord preserve us, it is the bairnses' faither!' she exclaimed.

'Atweel is't,' says Scott; 'but what's wrang wi' ye? The yaud's shod, an' the graith's shewed, an' that's the chack¹ for the daidlies,² an' Miss Forbes's portmancy, an' the orra things for the maister,' said the foreman, turning round and surveying his parcels with much satisfaction; 'an' I have the physic for the mere in some o' my pouches.'

'Gude guide us!' cried his wife, in the last stage of consternation; 'is he clean gane wud at last? Come doun, man, an' leuk roun' ye.'

Scott descended as he was bid, and gazed in wonderment all round him, but evidently saw nothing amiss.

'Wi' see look ye!' said Mrs. Scott, pointing to the horse; 'whae's beast hae ye come aff wi'?' For the first time, apparently, Scott took a look

¹ Checked cotton or linen.

² Children's pinaflores.

at the steed he was driving. 'Fegs ! it's nane o' oors,' he exclaimed quietly ; 'it's just as weel, gude-wife, ye noticed it ; but bang in, an' I'll tak' ye hame, at ony rate.'

'An' an unco bonnie story that wad be !' said the prudent wife ; 'tae set a' the callan's lauchin' at ye ! Na, na ; jist slip awa' back an' get oor ain beast as quaity as ye can, an' me an' Miss Forbes will get hame on shanks-naiggle.'¹

And a very fatiguing form of locomotion I found it that night ; and, late and tired and dispirited, I presented myself in Mrs. Ryland's sick-room, to receive, as I feared all along, a very scanty welcome, making it doubly difficult for me to feel that tender sympathy for her which every good sick-nurse should have for her patient.

But even when doing my best for this woman, who had no earthly claim on my services, I saw she only endured me as a necessary evil ; and I wondered why she had not sought some one to nurse her who would have been less repulsive to her susceptibilities, and freed her from a presence that, I sometimes almost feared, retarded her recovery.

For she made no progress towards convalescence : the malady had indeed been arrested before I went, and it was thought that with care and good nursing her strength might return, and her days on earth be prolonged ; but from age, or constitutional weakness, or because the trouble had been too strong for

¹ Their own feet.

her, there was no perceptible rallying, but, on the contrary, a gradual loss of vital energy and functional power.

It was a painful sickness, rendered more so by the querulousness of the patient,—the never-ending exactions that kept both herself and me in a perpetual turmoil,—my fruitless efforts to please or call forth a word of gratitude or praise; and had it not been for Mrs. Scott, who came in sometimes to cheer me with her quick, bright ways and ardent sympathy, I would soon have been as worn out and exhausted as she for whom I was so thanklessly toiling.

Of Matthew Dale I saw but little. His visits to the sick-room were few and brief; and I did not blame him for so seldom invading a scene where it was only too evident his presence gave little or no real pleasure; where the reception he most days met with must have been insufferably painful to him, when—whether for love or for hate, no mortal tongue could tell, but for some reason known only to herself—his sister seemed as if she were hardly able to bear the sight of him, and either feigned sleep, or lay with her face to the wall, whenever he approached.

To myself on these occasions he was studiously polite—that was all; though I sometimes fancied there was a wistful look in his eyes when they met mine. But whatever he did, I tried my best to look indifferent; and, long after, I had the doubtful pleasure of hearing that I had succeeded admirably.

I had been about three weeks at Hallyards, when a day's temporary rallying gave an unwonted accession of strength to the invalid. She was speaking more firmly, and was able to do more for herself than had been possible to her since her illness; and I proposed sending for her brother to come and sit with her, and mark the progress she had made since he last looked in.

‘You and he might have a pleasant talk together, now that you are able for it,’ I said; ‘and I would be glad of some rest.’

I had just finished dressing and feeding her, and had propped her up comfortably in bed; and I was feeling sick and faint with toil and want of sleep, and the new lease of life on which she appeared to have entered might have been a slice out of mine —for of the two, just then, she was the least exhausted.

‘You do look tired,’ she replied, with a slight softening towards me—for usually her features, when she addressed me, took on a hard, fierce expression, that served to keep us as far apart as we were on the day when she sailed into Hallyards, just after I went there to be housekeeper, and affected to take me for the housemaid. ‘Yes, I see you are in need of rest,’ she continued; ‘but I cannot indulge you, or my whole object in sending for you would be frustrated.’

I wondered what she could really mean. Did she intend to make a full end of me there and then —killing me by inches, and gloating over my

lessening strength as day by day I got more and more worn out? And as she sat there, surveying me with a keen, inquisitive glance, it seemed to my failing powers of mind and body as if she would effect her end.

‘Whatever your object was,’ I said, ‘I came at your need to nurse you, and’—but she peremptorily stopped me.

‘Cease!’ she exclaimed; ‘I have something to say to you while strength permits. Do not interrupt me.’





CHAPTER XXXI.

A DYING CONFESION.

LDREW a chair to the foot of Mrs. Ryland's bed, and sat down facing her, meekly awaiting her pleasure. I was too tired, and my energies too much exhausted, to feel any great anxiety or interest as to what she was about to say: all I cared for was, that she would say it and be done with it, so that perhaps I might yet find time for rest. I fancy I even yawned in her face as she hesitated about making a beginning; but mental shocks have often the effect of enveloping in uncertainty what has immediately preceded them, and I know I got a blow that made my brain reel, and blotted out everything but the sense of sudden stunning.

'You must make me a promise,' she began, 'that you will keep secret what I am about to tell you so long as I am in the world; for I do not choose to undo what I have done, or witness the failure or miscarriage of my plans. Will you promise?

Promise solemnly that you will do this. I do not pretend to have any great opinion of you ; I never had ; but I hope you would not break a promise you had deliberately undertaken to keep. At any rate, for the relief of my conscience, I must trust you so far.'

'You might give me credit for more than that,' I replied rather hotly. 'Did you ever find me breaking my word to you, or to any one ?'

'You must keep quiet, and not excite either yourself or me,' she rejoined ; 'I have not strength to bandy words with you. What I have to say concerns yourself and another. If you choose to make the promise I require, you can hear it now. If you refuse, on your own head be the blame. I am clear, so far as speaking now can clear me. What I did, that I considered best at the time. If I have come to see things differently, that is my own affair ; you have nothing to do with it.'

My pulses were already quickening. Who was this other who, with myself, had an interest in this mysterious disclosure ? Would I get it out of her while she had breath to tell it, and while she was in the humour for doing so ? On what chances of unreasonable caprice and possible incapability hung the unveiling of the mystery ! and all I could do was to fold my hands in seeming resignation, and bind myself to the hateful promise, while my whole soul rose up in rebellion against the fetters she was weaving around me ; and, but that pru-

dence forbade, I could have shaken her till her filthy secret flowed forth, whether she would or no !

‘Then you agree to my terms,’ she said, when I had given, or rather she had wrung from me, the desired promise—namely, neither to take speech nor action on what she was about to tell me, till, supposing I outlived her, her closed record might open mine. It was a hateful compact to me, and, for very opposite reasons, it appeared to be little less so to her—for, instead of commencing her confession, she kept moaning to herself, ‘I did it for the best—I did it for the best ! I little thought it would ever come to this !’

Meanwhile a dark suspicion was dawning on my mind, making it difficult for me to keep silent and maintain that absence of excitement on which she had warned me all depended ; but I clenched my teeth, and clasped my hands, and sat astonished, while she made her moan and her confession, mixing them up together in a way which plainly showed she was no true penitent—that fear was the hangman’s whip that urged her on, and that the violated law was only sorrowed over in so far as it might one day rise up as a witness against her.

The story was the old one of an opened letter—first opened, and then fraudulently kept back, partly to cover the first transgression, and partly because, forsooth, she had set herself up as the custodian of her brother’s honour, forgetting that she should have paused when she felt her own

'honour grip,' and that no false sophistries of coming good will ever excuse present evil.

'And where is my letter now?' I asked calmly; for though I was prostrated by the blow, yet somehow, in the innermost chambers of my heart, I was conscious of a lightsome feeling. My master's conduct was cleared up at last; and though we might be parted for ever, it was joy and gladness by comparison to think that he was blameless.

So I asked for my letter—for even now it would be precious; and though my promise shut out the present possibility of any reply to it, or of any practical use being made of it, I could yet lay it in my bosom, and press it to my lips, and feast my eyes on it, and weave out of every word a hundred seraphic meanings.

'The letter lies there,' she said, indicating a drawer in her dressing-table, 'and I will give you the key so soon as you are ready to quit the house. Your work here is ended: you will now understand why I sent for you. If I had been able, this crisis would have been sooner arrived at; and I must say I should feel happier if you would betake yourself elsewhere. You can arrange with Ann Scott to send for you—when—when—' She paused, overcome for the first time. It was not given, even to Mrs. Ryland, with all her stoicism, to contemplate unmoved the hour when the world would be moving on without her.

'Yes, yes, I understand,' I said; 'as I have lived so long without my letter, I can wait still;

but will you not allow me to stay on and nurse you? I know your ways now, and, hardly as you have used me, I would do my best to keep you comfortable. You need not fear my touching the letter—it would be of little real use to me so long as my promise is in force.'

'And so you would use it still!' she cried, as a glance of fierce contempt shot from her cold grey eyes. 'My brother seems to have been more than ready to accept your silence, and I think any modest woman would shrink from obtruding herself where such an issue is at stake.'

Stung to the quick, I forgot my duty and her weakness. 'When fraud has not been stopped at to separate us, misrepresentation may have been at work as well.'

'Go from my sight,' she cried, 'and leave me alone! It was a dark hour when I first set eyes on you, designing and intriguing creature that you have been!'

'Mrs. Ryland,' I exclaimed, 'you shall not speak so! You have taken every undue advantage of me, and I have never knowingly done you harm. If we must part, let us do so in peace. Deeply as you have injured me, I can say from the heart that I freely forgive you. If we are never to meet again'—But here I too had to pause, overcome by strong emotion. It seemed so terrible to have to plead with a dying sinner for love and good-will instead of envy and hatred; and I longed for burning, eloquent words wherewith to tell her of the love

that was stronger than death. But—who knows?—the words that I thought were needed would not come, and the tears that I would have withheld would not be kept back; and it might be that the silence was more eloquent than the words, and the tears more burning than speech, for a sudden revulsion seemed all at once to possess her, and she held out her hand.

‘Farewell, then!’ she faintly said, — perhaps, after all, she was not so hardened as she wished to appear,—‘farewell! and if what we have been speaking of comes about, see that you make my brother’s happiness your chief concern.’

I kissed the poorwasted hand that for the first and last time clasped mine. If we had few ties between us, we had at least a common object of earthly adoration; and as she said she had done it for the best, what less would I have had her doing? To me she spoke no further word, but silently pointed to the key I was to take with me; and, securing it, I sent the housemaid to sit with her till I could arrange with Mrs. Scott about the nursing.

‘There’s naething sae queer as folk,’ remarked that sagacious woman, when I told her I had been summarily dismissed. ‘Yon day I soucht ye, it seemed as if the old mistress couldna deval¹ till she had ye beside her; an’ noo? Weel, weel, but she was aye a kittle² customer tae lippen tae.’

‘You may well say that,’ I thought to myself;

¹ A figurative expression—hold herself aright.

² Ticklish.

but I did not enter on any explanations, as that would have been to break faith with the dying woman, who had been at so much pains to conceal from those around her her real wish for having me beside her.

That day I returned to Blackadder ; and, as had been arranged between Mrs. Scott and me, I sent old Janet down to Hallyards to take my place at Mrs. Ryland's sick-bed.

Then I bought a bit of blue ribbon, and hung my precious key round my neck. I think, had it remained long with me, I should have made a veritable graven image of it. But I was not destined to wear my fetich for any length of time. Whether the unhappy woman, who had stilled the voice of conscience till it rose up to torment her on her sick-bed, had over-exerted herself in talking to me, or whether the strength she then put forth had only been a last flaring up of the expiring lamp, I know not ; but Janet was hardly well installed at her bedside till a change for the worse set in, and, after lingering for twenty-four hours, she breathed her last, with her hand clasped in the brother's for whom, as she said, she had done her best, and who, when he came to know, some time afterwards, of what she imagined was best for him, and the plan she took to secure him from harm, only shook his head, and said, 'Poor Catherine !'

All this time my brother James had been oscillating, as I supposed, between Hallyards and

Blackadder,—alternating the amenities of Janet's little cottage with the 'caller air and the loany,' as Mrs. Scott described them, of the farm ; and I had often been thinking how the dear laddie would be missing me, and how he would be passing his holiday without me ! It was all I knew about it ! On reaching Blackadder, Jamie had not been seen in that neighbourhood for several days, but he turned up towards the close of the following one.

Thinking of the old song,—and I doubt I was even a little light-headed,—I gaily hummed to him, 'An' whaur hae ye been a' day, my boy Jamie ?' For a moment the laddie flushed up to the eyes ; but, thinking better of it, he looked bravely up in my face, and answered me in my own bantering tone,—

'I've been by burn and flowery brae,
Meadow green an' mountain grey,
Courtin' o' a young thing
Just come frae her mammie.'

I did not require to ask who this young thing might be ! Jamie and I never had any secrets from each other ; and I knew, or guessed, that a love-affair between him and the youngest daughter of the manse was just budding into life, though I never suspected he was taking advantage of my preoccupation to forward it.

What would the Grahams say to it ? One daughter running off, and the other breaking loose from her mother's apron-strings before she was well

done with her education! Really, as Mrs. Scott remarked, it was 'eneuch to put love and marriage oot o' fashion.'

But I was determined that this, at least, should be no clandestine affair.

'Do you two young things understand each other, then?' I asked.

'Well,' said Jamie, hanging his head a wee bit, 'she came up with me as far as the glen, for I expected to find you at the Ha'; and I stole a kiss when we parted, and Maggie's heart was beating.'

'And yours?' I asked.

'Mine was beating too,' laughed the boy; 'it was different'—apologetically—'from kissing you.'

'Then, my man,' I said severely, 'the next thing you'll have to do will be to go and tell the minister.'

'Tell him I kissed Maggie! Nonsense, Annie!'

'You know what I mean, James; you must either do it, or make up your mind not to see her again.' I spoke quite solemnly, for he seemed too much inclined to laugh and joke over the matter,—and love, with me, had been too stern a reality to care to see it taken up so lightly.

'Well, I'll go to-morrow, Annie, and "ask papa," if that will please you; but I wouldn't face Mrs. Graham for anything you could offer me.'

'Not even for Maggie?'

'Maggie's already disposed of,' said the young fellow proudly; and I knew that from henceforth

I would have to play 'second fiddle' where I had always been first before.

The minister behaved very kindly to James, but there was to be no formal engagement till lessons and studies were past and done with.





CHAPTER XXXII.

ENGAGED AT LAST FOR THE LONG TERM.

AFTER Mrs. Ryland's death I was free from my promise; and immediately on hearing of it, I went down to Hallyards.

I daresay I ought to have put off going till after the funeral; but it did not seem to be in me to wait a moment longer than necessary, and I would only have proved myself a rank hypocrite if I had pretended to make a virtue of it.

So, while Mrs. Scott and Janet were still busy with the last sad offices for the dead, I took my key from my bosom, and, with a throbbing heart, I opened the drawer where my precious letter lay!

Yes—there it lay! with the address uppermost—‘Miss Forbes, the Manse,’—no post-town; so it had not been given up to Her Majesty’s mail, but intrusted to some private hand—most probably the hand that had stuck to it so firmly. But what matter about that? With a thrill, half of pleasure, half of pain, I lifted it, and hurried off to the room

I called mine, to read what had been written months before, and might be awaiting—yes, that was my hope and my prayer now: that it might be awaiting an answer yet.

It was everything that could be wished, saving in that one important particular: a realization what I had looked for so long,—a manly avowal of my master's love; a little reticent, it might be, but I liked him all the better that no sentimental vapouring detracted from the dignity and sincerity of his tone. Enough for me that he said his heart's desire was, that he and I might walk together down the hill of life, in a companionship which, he thought, might tend to the increased happiness of both. But—and here came the root of the whole matter, the runner that had tempted Mrs. Ryland astray—but if he had made a mistake in thinking so, he would accept my silence as a sign of it. (Oh, proud, proud Matthew Dale, who could thus sue for acceptance, but durst not risk the indignity of refusal!) But, he went on, if he were right, and his hopes had not been too presumptuous, would I name a convenient time and place, that we might speak face to face of what concerned us both? and which, but for his accident and my illness, had not been delayed so long.

Already six months had elapsed; and all the time he had doubtless, as he said, been taking my silence as a sign that I was indifferent to him—perhaps had been schooling himself, only too successfully, into forgetfulness of me—perhaps had

even been solacing himself with some new love; though certainly it had not been with Miss Graham, as my jealous fears had at one time led me to suspect.

'Oh, hard and cruel woman,' I cried in my distress, 'to come between two loving hearts and part them so!' And then I bethought myself of the clay-cold figure that lay in the next room, that would never feel grief or hatred or envy more; and I fastened my lips as with a bridle, that I might not bring a railing accusation against the dead.

What was now to be done? There lay the out-of-date letter, staring me in the face and crying out, *Too late! too late!* And there were Mrs. Ryland's words, with an equally audible voice, telling me that no modest woman would thrust herself into a gentleman's notice. Her opinion went for nothing, I told myself; yet somehow I could not shake off the impression of it. No; the more I thought of it, the more impossible it looked that I could sit down and pen a reply to the letter now, when all the conditions under which it was written might be changed.

I, too, had some pride of my own as well as Matthew Dale, and how would it be with me if I had to bear the pain of such a refusal as he had shrunk from? No; rather than that, I would put the letter where I found it, and let it speak for itself, if, by good luck, the writer ever came across it. That, surely, would not be thrusting myself into his notice. I might, I thought, then venture thus

far, and be permitted to retain my self-respect. I think now I might have ventured further ; but, as Mrs. Scott used to remark, 'It's so easy being wise behind the hand.'

And this was what I did ; nay, I did more. Seized with a new inspiration as I was about to close the drawer, I took the letter once more from its envelope, and scrawled with my pencil, just below the signature of Matthew Dale—'Alas ! alas ! that cruel hands have come between me and my love !' adding my initials and that day's date, under which I scored a black, black mark, wetting my pencil to blacken it ; and then, with a sigh of hope and fear, I committed my silent messenger to its old resting-place.

After that, locking the drawer, I gave the key to Mrs. Scott, with strict injunctions to deliver it to her master. She stared at it, and then at me, as she took it from my hand, for it was a small, ordinary-looking key ; and, what between endeavouring to impress Mrs. Scott with the importance of her charge, and at the same time trying to be off-hand and *nonchalant* about it, I only succeeded in making it and myself remarkable. But she promised at once to do as she was told ; and I knew that, as far as she was concerned, I was safe enough—for though an occasional familiarity of speech might slip out unawares, she always, from the first, recognised my position as mistress, and rendered to me the honour and duty belonging to that position.

That piece of business past, resisting all kindly wishes that I should remain over the funeral, I returned once more to Blackadder; for, though it was in my heart to stay and help them, and see that everything was managed in accordance with family and district customs, I felt that I could not run the risk of coming constantly into contact with my old master, and that my only safety lay in flight.

So we—that is, Janet and I—returned to Blackadder, there to wait in quietness for the next revolution of the wheel.

Quietness, did I say? No, there would be no more quietness for me on this side the grave, with so momentous a question waiting for settlement; with such deep alternatives impending; with such pregnant chances hanging over me like the sword of fate. For the next few weeks I was like one in a dream—the helpless prey of every foolish fancy that chose to shoot through my brain. After that, settled despair took possession of me; hope's bright and airy thoughts would no longer come at my bidding; my strength forsook me; my knees shook beneath me; my days were passed in listless inertness that I lacked the power to resist; and when I stretched my weary limbs on my sleepless bed, I became the victim of an unrest that kept me tossing to and fro, weaving wild schemes, which, however feasible they looked in the dark, would not bear the light of day upon them.

Janet—though not even to her would I speak of

ever since ; so that I often think that, even in this world, we reap a harvest of joy from a seed-time of tears. And as I look round on my husband and my three bonnie bairns, I am sorely inclined to differ from our good minister, who is something of a pessimist, and to think that this earth of ours is not so completely a vale of tears as he would have us believe, but that we have many crowns of joy and rejoicing even in this the house of our pilgrimage.





CHAPTER XXXIII.

L'ENVOI.

CENTLE READER,—for you must be gentle if you have followed with patience, and some little interest, these quiet episodes of an uneventful life,—I would not so ill repay your kindness, or pique your curiosity, as to leave untold any further details that the completeness of the narrative would seem to demand. Nor would I wish (like some storytellers) coolly to drop—just as some people drop their poor relations—the minor characters of my epoch when they have served my turn.

And first, I must tell how, a three weeks' bride, I was suddenly plunged into mourning—as has happened to many a bride before—by the sad news of poor Ned Ryland's death,—news made so much the sadder to us, in that he never reached the other side of the ocean, but died at sea, which thus became his 'vast and wandering grave.'

The first thing I thought of when I heard of it

was my dream. How short a time her lost love had been in following Alice Burnley to the spirit-land! Ah, what unanswerable problems the idea suggested!—problems that must remain unsolved till the awful vision of a mightier dreamer than I is fulfilled.

‘And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.

‘And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God: and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

‘And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

‘And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.’

In the midst of more vital uncertainties, we never knew precisely what particular ailment had carried poor Ned off in the outset of his opening prospects,—whether his wife had given him too much bromide of potassium, or whether the cayenne tea had been too strong or too weak for him, or, what is most likely of all, that the stimulants had been too suddenly stopped, which, I have always understood, is a dangerous experiment for any one who has been for some time addicted to their excessive use.

Ten years later, Grace Ryland came back to us a rich and prosperous woman, bringing with her a

young Ned Ryland, and a large fortune bequeathed to her by one of her uncles. So the New Zealand gold was invested in Scottish soil ; for Mrs. Edward Ryland bought Brooklands—our neighbour and landlord, Sir John, having just at that time died, over head and ears in debt. It is astonishing how the old county families (unless protected by entail) die out, and the fresh *bourgeois* blood takes its place, to run in turn the same career, and die of the same exhaustion.

I do not think my husband much fancied the idea of the new landlady. So he relieved her permanently of Hallyards ; and it is pleasant to reflect that where the Dales have been so long they are likely to be longer still—undisturbed, at least, by landlord caprice.

By this time Mr. Graham had left this earthly scene ; and my brother James—now happily married to Maggie Graham—was minister of our parish. So Grace took her mother to live with her, and the wedded couple have the manse to themselves,—which is all the more needful, as every spring a fresh olive-plant sprouts up at the young minister's table.

Thus we form quite a colony. And though Ned Ryland's widow and I will never have much in common, Ned's boy is a bond of union sufficient to bring and keep us fairly well together. The lad is a curious mixture of the idiosyncrasies of both his parents ; and though my young Matt—who has already begun to draw himself up like his father—

declares he is a milksop, the girlies—Alice and Annie—retort ‘that he is a more gentlemanly boy than Matt,’—whose strong desire to be manly makes him somewhat imperious with his sisters.

But I daresay it will all come right when they are a little older ; and Edwy will likely marry one of his cousins,—though which of them will be lady of Brooklands it would be impossible at present to forecast. As Grace Graham directed her husband’s choice, so Grace Ryland will probably influence her son’s.

THE END.

